HEPI

Debate

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A Baker's Dozen: Thirteen years of book reviews on higher education, 2013 to 2025

By Nick Hillman

About the author

Nick Hillman has been the Director of HEPI since January 2014. He previously worked in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills as the Special Adviser to the Rt Hon David Willetts MP (now Lord Willetts) when he was the Minister for Universities and Science. Earlier in his career, he was a History teacher and he also spent time working on policy at the Association of British Insurers. At the 2010 General Election, he was the runner-up in Cambridge.

Aside from his work for HEPI, Nick has written for many other think tanks and journals, including the *Oxford Review of Education*, *Contemporary British History* and *Patterns of Prejudice*. He also wrote the first authoritative account of being a departmental special adviser for the Institute of Government.

Nick is currently a governor of one university and two secondary schools. In June 2025, he was honoured to be awarded an OBE for 'services to higher education'.

Author's note

The reviews in the pages that follow have been reproduced as they appeared with only very minor tweaks to spell out abbreviations or for the grounds of consistency or, in a very small number of places, removing sentences which have become so outdated they could have confused readers.

The titles of the original blogs have been replaced with the names of the books while hyperlinks in the reviews have either been removed (for example where old links no longer work) or, more commonly, shifted to become footnotes. The original reviews remain *in situ*, so can still be seen in their original format online, generally on the HEPI website (www.hepi.ac.uk).

Three of the reviews first appeared in *Times Higher Education* and one first appeared on Wonkhe.com. These are reproduced here with kind permission, for which I am very grateful

I dedicate this collection to my wife, Lara.

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C. Biographies and autobiographies

Introduction

I started the HEPI blog 12 years ago in March 2014, soon after taking up the reins as HEPI Director. I have recently posted my 365th blog – so, at the time of writing, have exactly one year's worth of content. Initially, the HEPI blog was a forum where I, as HEPI's new Director and HEPI's only policy-focused member of staff, would post topical thoughts while encouraging people to engage with – and to challenge – what I said. As a result, the relevant section of the HEPI website was initially titled 'Debate'.

Early blog entry titles were often in the form of a question and included 'Australia … and North Korea?', 'Are careers advisers wrong?' and 'Why are PhDs so rarely publishable?' Certain topics made multiple appearances in those early years, including the forthcoming referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, academic selection at schools and universities and where higher education should reside within Whitehall.

However, HEPI's first foray into blogging was a little one-dimensional, irregular and un-diverse, meaning it did not prompt quite the level of interaction and comments from people outside HEPI that we had hoped to see. So the Debate section of the HEPI website gradually developed to feature a broad variety of voices and topics and was renamed simply 'Blog'. This section of the website also began to run book reviews for the first time. Output gradually grew so that, during 2018/19, a new blog entry became a daily occurrence, as it has been ever since.

Managing the blog became a core part of HEPI's beefed-up policy team. Feedback we receive on the blog entries today suggests people particularly value the range of voices, the variety of topics and the depth of expertise. This has ensured the blog is influential and, each day, the new content reaches deep inside Whitehall and other places of power, higher education institutions and the media.

We always strive to ways keep greener members of the higher education community, such as new lay governors, recently-elected student union officers or civil servants who may have just moved from other policy areas, in mind when sourcing and editing blogs. However, more experienced colleagues tell us they find the material just as useful. I remember meeting one manager who told me the HEPI blog was a great source of killer facts to give them an edge in meetings.

We recently adopted the fourth iteration of the HEPI website and are taking this moment to gather together here one particular type of output that hopefully has a longer half-life than some of the more immediate postings: the book reviews that I have written for the HEPI blog on various tomes relevant to UK higher education over the past decade plus. I have also snuck in, with kind permission, four reviews of mine that originally appeared elsewhere, three in *Times Higher Education* and one on Wonkhe.

The blog format has all sorts of advantages, such as speed and immediacy, but the downside of this is that new output can burn brightly and then fizzle out fast. Collecting blog entries together in the way this collection does is therefore an attempt to give more life to pieces that we hope are worth revisiting. In the pages that follow, there are 30 reviews published over 13 years and grouped into five sections, each of which is in reverse chronological order, with the most recent piece coming first. All the reviews refer, as you would expect, to higher education, but only some of the books are wholly or even mainly about higher education.

The overarching goal is not to persuade you my verdict on each book is the correct one; rather, it is to flag interesting books, always to encourage debate and, more implicitly, to persuade others to write reviews for HEPI in the future.

HEPI is, and will always remain, a home of conversation, so the words that follow are my opinions alone and not a HEPI corporate view. I doubt any of HEPI's Trustees or Advisory Board members, let alone my colleagues, agree with all that follows, which is why this publication appears as a yellow-fronted HEPI 'Debate Paper' rather than a teal-

fronted HEPI 'Report'. Because book reviews necessarily express an opinion on someone else's hard work, you may spot some contentious, even angry, responses in the 'Comments' section beneath the reviews if you take a look at where they originally appeared on the HEPI website.

To take one example from under one of the reviews gathered here, an eminent former vice-chancellor complained about my balanced assessment of one of Matthew Goodwin's books:

> ***HEPI was set up as a serious evidence based think tank. It was not set up to dabble in phoney party political 'culture wars'. I hope other long-term friends of HEPI agree.***[1]

Others may share the view that my review is too positive. Or perhaps the centre of political gravity in higher education is still far removed from that of wider society?[2] After all, the Wikipedia page on the book in question describes my review as 'highly critical'.[3]

In this context, it is worth noting that HEPI occasionally and unusually features more than one review of individual books. So, for example, as well as my review of the books in question, Dr Liz Jones also reviewed *Universities Under Fire* by Professor Steven Jones for the HEPI website and Professor Steven Jones himself also reviewed a *Bad Education* by Matthew Goodwin, while my former colleague Lucy Haire also reviewed *Paper Belt On Fire* by Michael Gibson.[4]

1 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/04/politically-correct-druggies-and-weirdoes-review-of-storming-the-ivory-tower-by-richard-corcoran/**

2 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/05/15/academics-keep-getting-election-predictions-wrong/**

3 **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Values,_Voice_and_Virtue#cite_ref-1 Accessed 1 December 2025**

4 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/08/31/book-review-of-steven-jones-universities-under-fire-by-liz-morrish-visiting-fellow-at-york-st-john-university/; https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/02/15/weekend-reading-matt-goodwins-bad-education-isnt-good-scholarship-but-does-that-matter/; https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/06/05/paper-belt-on-fire-a-review/**

Such differences of opinion remind us why book reviews are such an enticing form of writing. A review not only highlights which books are worth engaging with, it can also prompt conversation even after putting the book in question down. That is why, as a History teacher 30 years ago, I found it useful to discuss book reviews with my pupils (one of whom wrote a book that is reviewed in the pages that follow).

Occasionally of course, a review can ensure people do not spend time on books they are unlikely to enjoy or learn much from. As another Emeritus Professor put it on the same page of the HEPI website as the bad-tempered comment above: 'much better to publish book reviews and be damned. And it often saves us the trouble of reading such stuff.'

In general, all responses to content on the HEPI website – good or bad – are welcome because, unlike those think tanks that have been established to fight for a particular worldview, HEPI is strictly non-partisan and a charity to boot. So we are always keen to provide an outlet for people to respond to what we have said.

If you disagree with the verdicts in the pages that follow, or anything else HEPI has published, we urge you to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and get in touch. I also encourage people across the higher education sector to consider writing their own short and accessible book reviews for HEPI, as we want the website to remain a place where the latest relevant books are assessed, weighed up and subjected to a clear verdict. Some of the reviews in the pages that follow are among the best-read pieces on the HEPI website, which receives close to a million hits a year, so we can at least guarantee a lot of people will see what you say.

As a publisher of both full-length reports and shorter blogs, HEPI is neither digital-first nor print-first but takes a dual position instead. Depending on how this collection lands, we may look to bring other collections of HEPI blogs together in the future. If you have an idea for a sensible theme for another such collection, please do get in touch.

Finally, the main goal for any successful think tank is, as the descriptor suggests, to make people think. So I thank all those who have

contributed to the HEPI blog over the years who have enabled us to fulfil this purpose – as well as my wife, Lara, for having the patience that has allowed me to read, and review, so many books for HEPI and to whom this collection is dedicated.

A. Education and the State

Reforming Lessons: Why English Schools Have Improved Since 2010 and How This Was Achieved (2025) by Nick Gibb and Robert Peal

Review originally published on 30 August 2025

This is the second book on education in a row that I have reviewed on the HEPI website that comes from a right-of-centre perspective. The previous review (of a book by the President of the New College of Florida) garnered some pointed attacks underneath – 'No doubt we'll soon be seeing articles offering a "more balanced" perspective on Putin and Orban's records in office'. So let me start by noting HEPI has also run many reviews (by me and others) of books written by left-of-centre authors as well as centrist authors, such as Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeve, Simon Kuper, Francis Green and David Kynaston, Melissa Benn, and Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin.

Let me also note that we are always on the lookout for reviews of recent books that are likely to be of interest to HEPI's audience, irrespective of where on the political spectrum the authors of the books in question or – indeed – the reviewers sit. When we started running book reviews on the HEPI site many years ago, they tended to receive less engagement than other output, but that has changed over the years and they are often now among our most-read pieces. So the door is wide open. Come on in.

Now down to business. *Reforming Lessons* is a defence of the changes wrought by the long-standing and thrice-appointed Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, and to a lesser extent his boss Michael Gove, co-written by Gibb himself. The other author is Robert Peal, who was one of a group of young state-school teachers (often, like Peal, powered by Teach First) who made up the advancing phalanx for the school reforms that were implemented by the Coalition and subsequent Conservative Governments. (John Blake, the Office for Students's Director for Fair Access and Participation from 2021 to 2025 was another member of this front line and merits a mention in the book,

as was Daisy Christodoulou, who has contributed a Foreword and who features multiple times.)

At the risk of further brickbats, it would be absurd for HEPI to have ignored this particular book at this particular time, for it is currently a huge talking point among educationalists. But is not just about education; it is also a book about the practice of politics. As the authors themselves write, it is an account of 'the virtues of a subject-specialist minister driven by conviction in a specific cause rather than personal ambition.' It fulfils this brief very well indeed, so it should be read far beyond the education world, especially by aspiring ministers in any field where they want to make a difference. But, and I do not mean this to be in any way rude, I suspect it was not – in one important sense – all that hard for Gibb and Peal to make their case.

This is because the key international data on school performance, which come from the OECD's comparative PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment), show England forging ahead, including against other parts of the UK, between 2009 and 2022. So Gibb and Peal had a secure evidence base on which to build their story.

We may argue that PISA is not a perfect measure: it tests only a small number of disciplinary areas and to a fairly basic level of knowledge and it has not always been completed the same way (sometimes on paper and sometimes on screen), but it is better than anything else we have when it comes to comparing school systems – and infinitely better than anything we have in higher education.[5] So anyone who wants to shoot down the book's central claim that Nick Gibb succeeded as a Minister will struggle to find equally robust performance data for their argument – though they could presumably focus on other evidence such as on an apparent narrowing of the curriculum (though Gibb and Peal get their defence on this in first).[6]

5 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Andreas-Schleicher-lecture1.pdf**

6 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/A-crisis-in-the-creative-arts-in-the-UK-EMBARGOED-UNTIL-7th-SEPTEMBER-2017.pdf**

Near the start, the book takes a look at how any education changes begun in 2010 had to be extremely cost-effective – cost-cutting or else free – given the dire fiscal position, which led every major political party to promise drastic spending cuts at that year's general election. Gibb and Peal also paint a picture of the ineffectiveness and wastefulness of the expensive centralised initiatives based on contemporary orthodoxies that preceded the Coalition. The multi-billion pound Building Schools for the Future programme was perhaps the archetype for, as Gibb shows, tens of millions of pounds were spent on building individual schools with open-plan classrooms where staff struggled to teach and pupils struggled to learn. Another challenge during the 2000s is that schools were overwhelmed with bureaucracy: in 2006/07 alone, we are told, there were around 760 missives to schools from Whitehall and quangos – four-per-day for the whole school year.

Yet Nick Gibb is far from being a free-for-all libertarian right-winger. He is, rather, someone who wants to use the power of the state to drive policy, including how to teach reading (synthetic phonics) as well as how to shape other aspects of the school curriculum. It is easy to see how this approach could have gone wrong but Gibb's primary goal is always to follow the evidence as he sees it, and I cannot be the only parent who was amazed by how quickly their children started to read during their initial school years in the second half of the 2010s. Gibb has given more thought to schooling than any other modern politician and he rejects many of the ideas of his colleagues as much as those from the political left: he did not favour a wave of new grammar schools, he did not want GCSEs to be replaced by O-Levels and he opposed Rishi Sunak's Advanced British Standard.

The book might begin and end somewhat immodestly and uncollegiately by reminding readers that many commentators picked out education as the one and only really big success of the Coalition and Conservative years, yet this is not by any stretch of the imagination a selfish book. Nick Gibb shows how his worldview was built upon teachers like Ruth Miskin, academics like ED Hirsch and others – even his researcher Edward Hartman gets a namecheck (or rather two) for

introducing him to Hirsch. He shows how his agenda has been carried forward by people like Hamid Patel, Katharine Birbalsingh and Jon Coles.

Political colleagues like Michael Gove and David Cameron are given credit for changing Whitehall's approach to schooling. The triumvirate of advisers, Dominic Cummings, Sam Freedman and Henry de Zoete all receive praise, as does Nick Timothy for his stint in Number 10 as Theresa May's Joint Chief of Staff. Andrew Adonis garners the most praise of all for starting 'the revolution we undertook whilst in office', and Kenneth Baker is lauded for getting the successful City Technology Colleges (the forerunners of academies) off the ground in the 1980s. Gibb and Peal note there have been 'squabbles' between Conservatives and Lib Dems over who designed the Pupil Premium policy but they do not join in, concluding instead that 'we should celebrate that it was jointly pursued and agreed upon by the Treasury'.

There is high praise even for the man who temporarily displaced Gibb as the Minister for Schools, David Laws, especially for the design of the school accountability measure Progress 8, as well as for Lord Nash, who oversaw academies and free schools from the House of Lords. Gibb admits he did not agree with Nicky Morgan, who replaced Michael Gove as the Secretary of State for Education in 2014, on pushing 'character education' as a discrete concept but he excuses her on the grounds that 'she had been transferred to Education from the Treasury with no notice, so never had the luxury of time I had enjoyed to read up on education philosophies.'

The tales from Gibb's period as a backbench MP and then Shadow Minister also remind us that the most effective Ministers have typically learnt their briefs in the years before they take office rather than on the job. They then stay in post long enough to make a difference (or, in Gibb's case, do the job more than once). Even for bold reforming ministers, like Gibb and Gove, good policy tends to be patient policy. In contrast, many of Gibb's predecessors as the Minister for Schools were not in post for long enough to make a major sort of difference.

Gibb's account of his time in office also serves to remind us that it is wrong to think effective ministers must have worked in the field they are overseeing before entering Parliament: Gibb was an accountant, not a teacher, just like David Willetts, the well-respected Minister for Universities and Science during the Coalition, was a civil servant rather than an academic or scientist.

The book is peppered by illustrative and illuminating anecdotes. The one I found most shocking is about a visit Nick Gibb made in the mid-1990s to a school in Rotherham, where he was fighting a by-election: a headteacher 'explained how she had completed an "audit" of her school library, removing any old-fashioned books that simply conveyed information.' (A few years later, Tory party HQ abolished their library altogether, so it was not just schools that fell down this hole.) The second most shocking anecdote, at least to me, concerns the first draft of the rewritten National Curriculum for primary schools: 'when the first draft of the curriculum was sent out for informal consultation amongst maths subject associations, it returned with all 64 mentions of the word "practice" expunged from the document.' The funniest anecdote is one about Gibb visiting a successful academy that had converted from being an independent school: 'On my train up to Yorkshire, I saw a pupil's tweet expressing disappointment to find out the politician visiting her school was not Nick Clegg, as she had been led to believe, but instead "some random" called Nick Gibb.'

Personally, I dislike the language used by those who talk of an educational 'blob', not least because it paints all educationalists in the same negative light. Gibb dislikes the term too, and he was uncomfortable with his political colleagues throwing it about. He is pro-teachers and there were always some classroom teachers who held out against the knowledge-light 'progressivist ideology' even at its height. Gibb's reforms were designed to dilute the educational orthodoxy of unions and quangos and to give power to trusted headteachers as well as to multi-academy trusts instead – the watchword was 'high autonomy and high accountability'. His core goals were to find the best resources and teachers, then to free school leaders to make the

biggest differences they could and finally to encourage others to emulate them, especially via high-performing multi-academy trusts. If Blair's mantra was 'education, education, education', Gibb's was 'emulation, emulation, emulation'.

But while rejecting the 'blob' term, the book does help one to understand how the moniker came to gain such currency. Gibb tells a story, for example, of how, as an MP and a member of the Education Select Committee, he was summoned to the 'salubrious offices in Piccadilly' of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority. Once there, the Chief Executive and Chairman demanded Gibb stop asking parliamentary questions about their work. It was an error of immense proportions – perhaps if they had known Gibb had circulated anti-communist propaganda in Brezhnev's Russia, they would have had a better idea of how tough he is under the polite demeanour. Either way, the scenario served to remind Gibb not to back down in battles once he became a minister.

One surprise in the book is the degree to which Gibb thinks his reforms have deep roots and are here to stay. He makes a persuasive case for this, especially in the Conclusion, when he notes how embedded and successful some multi-academy trusts now are. Yet his book also recounts how Scotland and Wales have in recent years moved in the opposite direction to England, downplaying knowledge in their school curricula (and suffering the consequences in international comparisons). So one-way travel is surely not guaranteed.

Keith Joseph talked of a 'ratchet effect' in British politics and it might be too early to tell if the Gibb / Gove reforms are locked in or whether the pendulum could now swing back. What I saw after the 2024 general election from my vantage point of being a long-standing Board member of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) gives me less confidence that educational policy is now settled. Despite Gibb's belief his reforms will last, even he notes in passing the recent attempt to water down the freedoms enjoyed by academies. What is taught in schools, and how, will surely continue to be fervently debated and it is why HEPI has sought to focus minds in

higher education on the important Curriculum and Assessment Review established by the Government under Professor Becky Francis.

The book is all about the pipeline to higher education but it is not really about higher education except near the end, where the authors take a look at teacher training. Those running university education departments were among the people who did not take Nick Gibb seriously while in Opposition or in Government and they too paid the price for it:

> ***Of all the different sectors of the education establishment, university education faculties were – by a stretch – the most difficult with which to work. … the main message I received whenever I visited university education faculties was, as Jim Callaghan had been told 40 years previously, 'keep off the grass'. Meetings I had usually consisted of being talked at for 90 minutes in a boardroom with no appetite or opportunity for discussion. If I, as a minister, showed any interest in what they thought, they would mistily invoke the virtues of 'academic independence', and insist the government had no place stepping on their hallowed turf.***

At the very end of the book, Gibb bemoans the fact that, when it comes to 'the evidence revolution in English education', 'university education faculties have been – with one or two exceptions – notable only by their absence'. And when it comes specifically to school teaching, Gibb regards universities as part of the problem rather than the solution. (So perhaps we should not be surprised that Gibb and Peal do not mention the short-lived attempt by Theresa May's Government to get universities to sponsor academies.) I was left feeling there were lessons for how the higher education sector can best engage with Ministers and officials.

While Twitter / X may often be a sewer today, Gibb argues that various education bloggers and tweeters (often from the political left) played

a vital role in shoring up his reforms, for example in helping Michael Wilshaw sort out Ofsted, who we are told 'succeeded where Chris Woodhead could not.' Gibb may point the finger of blame at those who pushed the 'progressivist ideology' that he has fought against but when it comes to A-Level grade inflation, for example, he does not limit his criticism to the Blair / Brown Governments, also complaining about his Conservative predecessors. Yet despite the ferocious attacks he was subjected to as a Minister, Gibb does not respond in kind, confident instead that his policies rested on evidence from the UK and overseas rather than polemic.

This is a lengthy book and a very very good one, though it does not stop me wanting to know more about what Gibb thinks in one or two areas. For example, we surely do not talk enough about demographics in education. Yet it was the growing number of young people that was part of the reason why the Treasury and others accepted lots of brand new schools called 'free schools', just as it was the falling number of school leavers prior to 2020 which helped persuade the Treasury to remove student number caps for undergraduates in England. Gibb does acknowledge the impact of changes to the birth rate in boosting his agenda, but personally I would like to have read more than the single paragraph on page 155 about it.

Churchill is said to have remarked, 'history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it'. I kept thinking of this as I was reading the book, so it is perhaps too much to expect a deep dive into educational areas that the Conservatives failed to fix in their 14 years in charge. For me, these are: the educational underperformance of boys relative to girls, which does not merit any specific mentions; the current crisis in the supply of new teachers, which gets less than a page of dedicated text; and post-COVID truancy rates, which gets a paragraph and a couple of other fleeting mentions.[7] But Nick Gibb is, and will rightly remain, one of the most important Ministers of recent decades – and to think he never even made it into the Cabinet.

7 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/boys-will-be-boys/**

University to Uni – The Politics of Higher Education since 1944 (2004) by Robert Stevens

27 August 2024

It has taken me almost 20 years but, over the summer, I eventually got around to reading a book I've been meaning to read on higher education policy since I started working in the area over 15 years ago: *University to Uni – The Politics of Higher Education since 1944* by Robert Stevens.

It was 20 years ago today ...

The summer of 2024 seemed a good moment to pick the book up as it is exactly 20 years since the Higher Education Act (2004), which the book is pivoted around. Stevens, whose roles included serving as Chancellor of the University of California-Santa Cruz and Master of Pembroke College, Oxford, had first-hand knowledge of both the UK and US higher education sectors but he is sadly no longer with us, having passed away in 2021 – though anyone with young children may be familiar with his daughter's immensely successful series of books, *Murder Most Unladylike*.

Based largely on lectures delivered on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, *University to Uni* has a lively pace reminiscent of other books that began as a series of lectures (such as Robert Blake's history of the Conservative Party). But it also suffers from its origins, most notably the disjoints caused by a surfeit of ridiculously long footnotes covering details that could not, presumably, be squeezed into the lectures.

Nonetheless, the book includes some neat historical facts that had either passed me by or which I once knew but had largely forgotten. For example:

- the linkage between the demands of the UK from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1970s and the increase in international students' fees in the early Thatcher years;

- how the Jarratt report on the efficiency and management of universities (1985) and the Croham report on the University Grants Committee (1987) helped set the scene for Kenneth Baker's important expansionist speech at Lancaster University in 1989;[8] and
- the fact that one reason the polytechnics were upgraded to become universities was, at least in the eyes of some people, 'the need to keep up the supply of foreign students'.

And in Stevens's brief retelling of the story of NVQs and GNVQs, we are reminded that turmoil in vocational qualifications, seen currently in the latest battles between BTECs and T-Levels, is nothing new.

Vivienne Stern of Universities UK has recently rightly reminded us that there was a time not so long ago when international student fees were supplementary to other institutional income whereas they have now become central to the very survival of many institutions; this book in contrast reminds us that there was an even earlier time, in the late 1990s, when international students were also crucial to institutional survival: 'their contribution through fees to the survival of the UK universities was impressive, although it probably should have been embarrassing.'

In a few other areas covered by the book, we can see clearly how time has marched on – for instance, there is more information provided here than one would wish to include in any new book on the slightly tedious battles over Oxbridge college fees, which were a bugbear of some parts of the Blair / Brown ascendancy. Some of the language has dated too: the anger of Labour MPs is described as being 'as violent towards Oxford and Cambridge and the selective universities as it was to those who wore the pink in pursuit of the fox.'

8 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/09/01/last-time-conservative-government-set-higher-education-targets/**

Nationalising the universities

Above all, Stevens follows Simon Jenkins and others in arguing that, while Thatcher privatised the utilities, she nationalised the universities by putting them at the whims of the state and the economy: 'Thatcher's free-market Cabinet loved it! They had destroyed the collegiate model and substituted the dependency model.'

Stevens also reminds us that the big expansion of higher education in the late 1980s and early 1990s spooked the Treasury, forcing cuts to the resources for teaching and the reimposition of control over student numbers, not to mention the splitting of public funding for teaching and research (initially within the old block grant, 'emphasising research support based on excellence … just as the funding of teaching was reduced to the egalitarian mean').

His book also intriguingly foresees the squeezing of those institutions between the ancients and the older red bricks on the one hand and the former polytechnics on the other, specifically listing institutions like University of East Anglia, the University of Hull and the University of Kent as heading for trouble – all of which are known to have faced recent challenges.

Part 2 of the book starts immediately after a general election (1997) in which the two main political parties colluded to keep higher education out of the campaign, just as they did in in 2010 and, arguably, 2024. It is a familiar story: when compared to the past or to competitors abroad, we are reminded that universities were underfunded to the tune of billions of pounds a year by the time the Major Government succumbed to New Labour's election-winning machine.

Equality or excellence?

If there is an overarching theme of the book, it is equality versus excellence: or to put it another way, equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity. Time and time again policymakers, both politicians and civil servants, are divided into those who prioritised equality over excellence (apparently, Department for Education

civil servants, old Labour and the past leadership of Universities UK) and those who preferred excellence (some Conservatives and older universities as well as those in charge of distributing research income).

The former group are seen as making solid progress, with public policy ensuring 'elite universities had been increasingly frozen'. Stevens quotes Lord Renfrew approvingly for saying just after the millennium, 'Britain's world-class universities and Britain's other universities besides have fallen into deficit through what has become a bankrupting funding policy … that is beginning to lead to irreversible decline.'[9]

The parallels with 2024 in the book are less to do with 1997, even though both years saw a newly installed Labour Government back in office after years in the wilderness. The parallels are instead stronger between 2024 and 2003/04, when the Blair Government in its second term was having another go at sorting out university financing – with, according to Stevens, 'remarkable courage'.

One key question at the time was whether it was possible to maintain a world-class system university, just as the *Sunday Times* recently posed exactly the same question on its front page.[10] Stevens notes Kenneth Baker's useful contribution to a parliamentary debate in the early 2000s:

> ***When great institutions decline, they do not decline precipitously; there is no precipice. They simply decline very slowly. Higher education in this country is now heading down that slope and I believe that the Government are doing very little to arrest the decline.***[11]

9 **https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2002-11-27/debates/a55f365e-88fb-497d-b6c1-edb7a440583c/UniversityFinance?highlight=hong**

10 **https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/funding-crisis-means-golden-age-of-universities-is-over-g55ngp2qf**

11 **https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2000-06-14/debates/c959883f-f019-4de8-a407-7832436d828e/HigherEducation**

Another live issue 20 years ago was whether the Labour Party could be held together on such an important issue, one which split the Blarities and the Brownites. The eventual answer was 'just', as the legislation introducing £3,000 fees pipped through Parliament with a majority of just five (thanks in part to Tory abstentions and one Tory rebel as well as Scottish Labour MPs voting on an England-only measure).[12] The key to this success was, we are told, 'the drip-drip' of providing additional maintenance support to poorer students. Given today's woeful maintenance settlement, the sound of those drips should echo through the years.[13]

One notably big difference between today's debates and those of a generation ago is the centrality of 'differential fees'. The Labour rebels in 2003/04 were most exercised about the risk of a two-tier system, in which some institutions charged more than others. In contrast, Stevens regarded a two-tier system as the price of excellence, condemning those seeking equality of outcomes in a style that sometimes veered on the snobbish: 'they would rather see Oxbridge, UCL, Warwick and Imperial underfunded than see such institutions given different capitation fees or allowed to charge variable fees.'

As we have since had differential fees in theory but not in practice, with pretty much every full-time undergraduate course now priced at the same level for home students, much of the fuss on both sides in 2003/04 looks today to be smoke with no fire.[14]

Biting the bullet

Back then, New Labour Ministers bit the bullet, ripped up their own 1997/98 settlement and put in place a system for the long term. To take the bullet analogy one stage further, the 2003/04 fees settlement

12 **http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3434329.stm**

13 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/09/landmark-hepi-report-shows-students-studying-outside-london-need-18600-to-have-an-acceptable-standard-of-living/**

14 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418**

in England was close to being that rarest of items in public policy: a silver bullet.

It solved a funding crisis and has outlived many different governments: it is the underlying legislation from 2004 that continues to govern university and student funding today, 20 years on, and upon which the Coalition's bold increase in fees back in 2012 was built. If the settlement looks outdated today, it is because the parameters were fixed rather than allowed to float up with inflation as the value of each pound fell.

Will the latest crop of Labour Ministers be similarly brave enough to put a long-term funding solution in place that enables our universities to remain globally competitive and gives our students sufficient income to live with dignity and to play a full part in student life? And given that in both 2004 and 2012 (as well as at the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections), the main Opposition party played politics rather than seeking to help deliver a long-term solution for higher education funding, will the Conservatives this time around recognise there are, in fact, few – if any – net gains in votes to be won by opposing more help to students and more help to universities?[15] From the vantage point of the early 2000s, Stevens said Conservative higher education 'policies since 1997 have been, to put it mildly, strange.' Back in Opposition today, they have an opportunity to learn from this error.

In the end, whether policymakers want to emphasise equity or excellence, they have to recognise – like Blair and Cameron / Clegg before them – that it costs money to deliver.

15 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/05/how-influential-are-student-voters/**

Universities Under Fire: Hostile discourses and integrity deficits in higher education (2022) by Steven Jones

25 August 2022

Steven Jones, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Manchester, is one of the nicest people I have met in our sector. As I saw first-hand when he was a staff governor of his institution, where I am a lay governor, Professor Jones knows how to deliver effective change without making enemies.[16] If I were an academic, I would want him to be my boss.

As his decade-old but still topical work on UCAS personal statements shows, he is also an effective communicator who seeks to use his research to deliver a better society.[17] He has now written a wide-ranging new book, *Universities Under Fire: Hostile discourses and integrity deficits in higher education*, outlining his thoughts on recent higher education policy in England. His generosity ensured I received a free copy, for which I am very grateful.

There is lots that this book, which I urge you to read, is good on – especially regarding apparent paradoxes in recent policymaking, which we have perhaps waited too long to see written up well.

In short, as Jones says in the conclusion, the book's argument is that 'the way in which the modern university operates seems to actively defy its own scholarly evidence.' This is, according to Jones, largely the fault of outside forces but also down to the quiescence of 'obsequious' university leaders. The breadth of sources referred to along the way is impressive, and – I am pleased to see – includes much HEPI output.

16 **Mt third term as a governor at the University of Manchester came to an end in the summer of 2025.**

17 **https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/JONESPERSONALSTATEMENTS-2.pdf**

But Steven would not expect me to agree with his overarching argument that the English university sector is being ruined by an unholy alliance of politicians and institutional leaders engaging in a long-term strategy of marketisation … and indeed I do not. In particular, the book's extreme pessimism about the direction of policy and the impact that this has had does not square with the sector's successes.

Marketisation

The focus of the book is primarily on the ills that the marketisation of English higher education is thought to have created in terms of needless accountability, regulation and bureaucracy. It includes a gentle pop at me for talking about 'so-called' marketisation rather than recognising a more full-bloodied sort. But it is a phrase I often use because the English higher education sector is far from a pure market. More importantly, I cannot recall ever meeting anyone who thinks it should be a pure market.

For one thing, English universities receive billions of pounds of public subsidy every year for their two main activities, teaching and research, and they deliver an excellent return on this in the form of hundreds of thousands of new graduates each year and swathes of world-leading research. It is true institutions are held accountable for some of this funding through evaluation exercises and metrics but they (as Jones admits towards the end of the book) remain more free than other publicly financed institutions. Moreover, the policymakers who get such a pounding in this book are the same people who took a big political hit for raising the finances available for university teaching via higher fees and who are now committed to huge increases in research spending.

Because no one has been aiming for a pure market, attacks which focus on how we have ended up with an imperfect market seem to me to be off target. We tend to recognise the NHS has to balance the needs of patients, staff, taxpayers and the pharmaceutical sector rather than those of just one of these four; universities similarly

have to balance the needs of students, staff, taxpayers and graduate employers. England has developed a system that, while far from perfect, one could easily argue is carefully balanced in its approach, with well-funded universities and lots of student places, all paid for in a progressive fashion.

Jones's preferred alternative to the current system is one in which academics and activist students have more freedom to run their institutions collaboratively rather than competitively, with those pesky managers having much less influence and policymakers butting out almost entirely. It sometimes sounds like he wants to return to a distant past, when elected politicians were less likely to try and pry behind the curtains of the ivory towers. Yet this case cannot be made too explicitly because, in days gone by, higher education institutions may have been more clearly self-governing communities of scholars but the sector was much smaller, more closed and less representative than it is today, severely holding back its contribution to society.

The expansion of English higher education – which has been funded through high fees and loans, encouraged by access tsars and enabled by the removal of student number caps – has also guaranteed the system is perceived differently by the media and the public. As Rosie Bennett showed in her 2021 HEPI paper, universities have become 'the ultimate consumer story.' Unless the sector is to contract significantly, that seems unlikely to change.[18]

Neoliberalism

Jones marries his critique of marketisation with a critique of the underlying ideology said to promote it: neoliberalism. We are told that 'A fog of neoliberal determinism has descended on England's campuses'. The HEPI *Style Guide* seeks to dissuade authors from using the term 'neoliberal' on the grounds it tends 'to reveal flabby thinking

18 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Embargoed-till-18-February-2021-Mixed-Media.pdf**

and conceal a clear line of argument.'[19] But focusing attacks on the English higher education sector through a neoliberal lens has two other problems here.

First, while terms like 'neoliberalism' echo with those who already agree with you, they do little to persuade new people of your case. Labelling something neoliberal is, at best, to wave a virtue-signalling flag about your own position on the political spectrum and, at worst (though not in Jones's case), an excuse to repel entirely reasonable demands for better student rights.[20] Secondly, it seems generally unhelpful to bandy around terms for ideologies that the supposed adherents do not use themselves. Recent Conservative politicians do not talk about wanting a 'neoliberal' higher education sector; nor do those on the centre-left who introduced tuition fees in 1998 and then tripled them in 2006. If the goal is to debate what such people do want, and perhaps even to alter their views as this book sets out to do, would it not be better to try and understand their approach by getting under its skin rather than caricaturing it?

Nonetheless, Jones is absolutely clear that the blame for any current problems lies with right-wing neoliberals and the reader is told that 'higher education is increasingly seen as an obstruction to the enactment of right-wing policy.' (The original cause of this is, inevitability, said to be Margaret Thatcher, even though it is almost half a century since she first led her party.)

Jones is so determined to condemn 'right-leaning politicians', 'right-wing think-tanks', 'right-wing commentators' and 'right-wing journalists', all of which receive a hammering, that his argument becomes a little confused in places. For example, after a page spent puncturing universities' online marketing strategies, Jones spends much of the next page criticising the *Daily Mail* for puncturing universities' online marketing strategies. Then, in a section on the

19 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Style-Guide-May-2020.pdf**

20 **https://twitter.com/jim_dickinson/status/1557965207636525056?s=20&t=gKV_77Y33tRB_HaKdRp6mQ**

National Student Survey (NSS), he rejects the idea that student satisfaction reflects the quality of a course before noting Ministers turned against the NSS in 2020 for exactly that reason. At this point, he pivots to reveal that research shows 'a positive correlation emerges between courses that are considered to be intellectually stimulating and students' rates of overall satisfaction.' It all leaves the impression that almost any criticism of English higher education is valid if it comes from a left-wing standpoint but the same criticisms are invalidated if they happen to come from right-wing bogeymen.

It is not only right-of-centre politicians that get it in neck, however. Senior managers inside universities are attacked too, and even though they generally started their careers on an academic pathway. This apparent challenge to Jones's view that academics would naturally opt to govern their institutions differently if only they had the chance is squared by claiming that it is the wrong people who currently rise to the top: 'universities are home to left-leaning *and* right-leaning staff. The difference is that the former group tends to sit towards the lower tiers of the power structure while the latter group is more likely to sit towards the top.' So anyone who is right-wing is not worth listening to and anyone who is not worth listening to must be right-wing.

Jones's ideal world seems to be one in which our current diverse university sector coalesces around a specific left-of-centre and 'anti-establishment' worldview. No doubt that would make fast progress in some areas. But it also sounds a little dreary, as well as inimical to the idea of academic debate, and even risks a situation in which students of the correct ideological disposition are more welcome on campus than others. In the end, I was left thinking it would be too one-dimensional for the sort of education sector that a large modern democracy, economy and society needs.

Woe-is-us

Steven takes a second gentle pop at me for talking about 'the *woe is us* culture of higher education' (his emphasis) and goes on to explain

why so many university staff feel under constant attack. Yet while it is undeniably true that staff morale has been falling, much of the argument as to why this is so seems poorly evidenced.[21] In one place, Jones go so far as to claim, 'The unstated policy goal has been to make English higher education more like the nation's independent (fee-paying) schooling system'.

I have never heard such a goal stated openly either (despite working in HE policy for over 15 years and simultaneously undertaking peer-reviewed research on policies towards independent schools).[22] There is no hidden conspiracy to turn Aston University into Eton University. Indeed, it seems more accurate to say the independent school and university sectors have been moving in opposite directions: the former has become more out-of-reach to middle-class professionals, while the university sector has been able to shift successfully from being an elite to a mass system on the back of hefty support from taxpayers. Some compromises have had to be made by universities on this journey, just as independent schools would need to make compromises with the state if they were to accept large sums of public money, but not all outside scrutiny is bad.

It is this shift to a mass higher education system that has raised the importance of the employability agenda, which Jones is particularly scathing about, claiming that 'The purpose of the *employability* discourse is to make university staff culpable' (his emphasis). Yet while the focus policymakers and universities have placed on the wider labour market has sometimes been cack-handed, it has not happened because they want to make life harder for academics; it has occurred because a huge range of roles, some of which need specific training – such as Nursing – are these days (rightly) filled by graduates.[23]

21 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/06/16/staff-mental-health-2019-2021-what-has-changed/**

22 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13619462.2010.518413**

23 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Getting-on.pdf**

We could row back on embedding employability in higher education, but it is not clear who would benefit. You would not get better pharmacists, say, if you discarded the employment-focused aspects or professional standards embedded in a standard university Pharmacy course. And, given one of the top reasons why people apply to university is to get a rewarding job, it would seem odd to downplay this aspiration in the design of courses if we want to deliver for students.[24]

Conclusion

There are some occasional flashes of searing honesty in the book. One paradox noted by Jones is that, despite all the evidence he and others bring to bear, 'disquiet with the English student loan system seems not to be mounting.' Perhaps, a decade on from the higher fees coming into existence, it is time to absorb this reality rather than to wish it away?

In particular, there comes a moment when any serious political party that has been in opposition for a long period has to move away from the pendulum theory of government (assuming things will swing back your way soon) to the ratchet theory (accepting some changes are embedded). For Labour before 1997, the reality of the ratchet meant accepting the economic debate had altered by changing Clause IV.[25] For the Conservatives after 1997, it meant embracing the National Minimum Wage.[26]

It is plausible that Sir Keir Starmer recognising English higher education benefits from a mixed funding model could represent a similar moment, reflecting a new political and economic reality and signalling a marked shift back towards the centre, where UK elections

24 **https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf**

25 **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clause_IV**

26 **https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2000/feb/04/thatcher.uk1**

are generally won.[27] The parable of Nick Clegg suggests it is better to break silly commitments before you are elected rather than after.[28] (There is, separately, a very strong argument for the troubled National Union of Students to find their own Clause IV moment, perhaps by adopting one-member, one-vote for their elected officers.)

Acceptance of the current funding model by the Labour leadership would reveal something Professor Jones misses, which is that the more centrist parts of England's main right-wing party and the more centrist parts of England's main left-wing party have more in common with each other when it comes to setting English higher education policy than they do with other parts of their own parties. That is why the Robbins report, the Dearing report and the Browne review enjoyed cross-party support. Jones's argument rests in part on lumping together recent right-of-centre policymakers with those much further to the right, who damagingly tend to think there are too many students and too many universities – but this makes no more sense than it would to muddle up Keir Starmer with Jeremy Corbyn.

Palgrave's Critical University Studies Series, in which Professor Jones's new book sits, is designed to provide:

> ***a much-needed forum for the intensive and extensive discussion of the consequences of ill-conceived and inappropriate university reforms … with particular emphasis on those perspectives and groups whose views have hitherto been ignored, disparaged or silenced.***[29]

The idea that those unsettled by recent higher education policy have not had a voice is strange, given the student riots of 2010 and the strikes of 2022 as well as the millions of words of critical commentary

27 **https://www.ft.com/content/44df4156-c035-4b0f-b576-b79fdd13b23c**

28 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2016.1184870**

29 **https://link.springer.com/series/14707**

and the numerous parliamentary debates bookended by those events. What such things have – so far – failed to do, however, is to persuade enough people of the merits of a radically different approach to higher education policy. I am pleased the new book series exists and that I took this particular volume to the beach to read, but a series of expert books that preach to the converted may not do that either.

The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World (2021) by Adrian Wooldridge

30 June 2021

This is a fascinating new book by the author of many fascinating books. Ranging from Plato to modern Singapore, it shows the power of the meritocratic idea. Much of it neatly captures the endless tension between aristocracy and meritocracy but also the way in which meritocracy itself can be problematic – all of which is evident in the title, *The Aristocracy of Talent*.

The book is worth reading for the grand sweep that it provides, for the wealth of material brought to bear and for the nice turns of phrase. Take, for example, the author's analogy for the current state of politics:

> ***One way to understand recent history is to think of a queue for coffee: you are heading to Starbucks in the morning, desperate for a cup of regular coffee before you start laying bricks, when a young person in LuluLemon yoga clothes cuts in front of you and orders a skinny no-foam extra-shot latte made with almond milk – for twenty people. Then the line turns round and starts giving you a lecture on how you're a sexist, racist bully who needs to check your privilege before speaking.***

Do not just take my word for it: I urge HEPI readers to check the book out and have no doubt many will enjoy it and find it a rewarding read. Indeed, on initially reading the book, I decided not to bother reviewing it as there did not seem much substantive to say other than that it is very good.

Yet when I reached the final section, I found it infuriating.

One of the most common reasons HEPI turns papers down is that even brilliant exposés of a problem can falter at the end. You can

read page after page of searing analysis and then turn to an insipid and unilluminating conclusion without clear recommendations for the future. Policy bodies must outline the policy consequences of their own analysis: if an author who knows the true nature of a problem is unclear on the lessons for policymakers, it seems unreasonable to expect policymakers to work out the solutions all on their own.

Yet I wish this particular book had ended with the analysis. I am not sure I have ever seen such a lengthy tome with such a chasm between the quality of the analysis and the weak policy solutions tacked on the end. Adrian Wooldridge's first 366 pages provide an excellent overview of the meritocratic ideal across different ages, different countries and different cultures, including the pros and the cons. In the final 34 pages, while the prose remains smooth, the ideas are rough.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for someone who studied at Balliol, All Souls and Berkeley, Wooldridge comes down firmly in the final analysis for meritocracy, despite its faults. Any weaknesses, he argues, can be tackled by introducing '*more* meritocracy' and '*wiser* meritocracy' (his italics) via specific policy initiatives.

So he is in favour of tough academic selection at a young age. He advocates for state-funded ('national') scholarships at the most elite private schools (specifically those like 'Eton, Winchester and Marlborough'). He argues for 'standardized tests' and against 'subject-focused tests'. He wants 'free university educations' for those who agree to spend a certain time working in the public sector. And he believes that, 'Perhaps the best thing that could be done to advance equality of opportunity would be to create educational priority areas, defined by poverty'.

But he avoids the uncomfortable fact that the literature on these specific ideas highlights severe shortcomings, making a new form of meritocracy harder to achieve than the book pretends. Let us look at each of them in turn.

i. **Academic selection at younger ages:** The evidence on academic selection, recently brought together in a HEPI collection of essays, suggests it can drag areas down.[30] That is why, for example, the Social Mobility Commission reported late last year that there are serious problems with social immobility in parts of selective Buckinghamshire and Kent.[31] (Incidentally, while such arguments against selection are usually applied to schools, Professor Tim Blackman has applied them to post-compulsory education.[32])

ii. **State-backed scholarships at independent schools:** The Attlee and Wilson Governments toyed with state-funded scholarships to leading independent boarding schools, but the schemes that did exist only helped a tiny minority, were bedevilled by problems of selection and offered taxpayers poor value for money.[33] Thatcher's Assisted Places Scheme aimed at day pupils suffered similar problems. Indeed, some years ago the Boston Consulting Group found sponsored places at independent schools to be the single least cost-effective social mobility intervention out of a dozen that they tested.

iii. **More use of standardized testing rather than subject-specific assessment:** In 2010, a five-year study to assess the value of using an aptitude test in the selection of candidates for admission to higher education, which involved the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS), the National Foundation for Educational Research (Nfer), the Sutton Trust and the College Board, concluded: 'In the absence of other data, the SAT® has some predictive power

30 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Social-Mobility-and-Higher-Education-Are-grammar-schools-the-answer.pdf**

31 **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/923623/SMC_Long_shadow_of_deprivation_MAIN_REPORT_Accessible.pdf**

32 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Hepi-The-Comprehensive-University_Occasional-Paper-17-11_07_17.pdf**

33 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0046760X.2011.598468; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2010.518413?journalCode=fcbh20**

but it does not add any additional information, over and above that of GCSEs and A levels (or GCSEs alone), at a significantly useful level.'[34]

iv. **Financial incentives to encourage graduates to enter public service:** New Labour experimented with student loan forgiveness for public servants as did Theresa May and Justine Greening and HEPI has in the past published a paper backing the idea.[35] It is too early to assess the later initiative but the evaluation of the earlier one was decidedly mixed, finding – for example – that teachers themselves tend to regard better discipline and lower workloads as more important for retention than financial incentives.[36]

v. **Educational priority areas, according to poverty rates:** It has been repeatedly shown that there is a low correlation between area-based boundaries and disadvantage. At its simplest, this is because rich people sometimes live in areas designated as poor and disadvantaged people sometimes live in areas deemed to be rich. A new Sutton Trust report, for example, finds POLAR, which measures university participation in different areas, 'is very poorly correlated with low family-income'; it also finds the number of years someone is eligible for Free School Meals 'is the best available marker for childhood poverty'.[37] So while geographical measures are not entirely without value, they have only limited utility as a tool to boost the education of individual disadvantaged people.

34 **https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/69647/1/10-1321-use-of-aptitude-test-university-entrance-validity-study.pdf**

35 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Embargoed-until-00.01am-Thursday-27-April-2017-WHITHER-TEACHER-EDUCATION-AND-TRAINING-Report-95-19_04_17WEB.pdf**

36 **https://www.academia.edu/1148950/Evaluation_of_the_repayment_of_teachers_loans_scheme**

37 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Measuring-Disadvantage-Report.pdf

Perhaps we can craft the finer details of any specific policy lever better than in the past and then use this to ensure the ideas in this book work more effectively the next time they are tried. But if Wooldridge has answers to the well-developed critiques of his policy ideas, we never find out what they are, as he skates over the surface as fast as Torvill and Dean. His policy ideas deserve a fair hearing, but they are so against the current mainstream consensus that they need far more supporting evidence to explain why they should be taken seriously – and why their critics are wrong – if they are to stick.

There is another oddity in the concluding pages too. After the preceding paean to academic excellence and the pleas to make academic selection more common and sharper, the author suddenly performs a handbrake turn in favour of that well-worn cliché 'equality of esteem' for different educational routes.

Having argued immediately beforehand for meritocracy to be given rocket boosters, it is as if he is trying to salve his conscience at the last minute. Most oddly, at this point in the argument he even endorses the ideas of David Goodhart, who has generally been seen as the scourge of meritocrats.[38]

Wooldridge lays the failure to deliver parity of esteem squarely at the door of policymakers, who – for example, he notes – converted polytechnics to universities almost 30 years ago. There are the usual nods towards technical education in Germany too, although there is no mention of the OECD's concerns about the slow pace of social mobility there.[39]

In contrast to blocking politicians, the mood of the general public is, we are told, much more favourable towards practical endeavours than cerebral ones – such as (and here the argument becomes very odd) the

38 **https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2020/11/david-goodhart-head-hand-heart-michael-sandel-tyranny-merit-review**

39 **https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-social-mobility-among-poorest-worse-than-in-the-united-states-oecd/a-44245702**

achievements of Matt 'Megatoad' Stonie who, apparently, 'earns more than $200,000 a year as the world's hot-dog eating champion'. Those who are trying hard to make T-Levels a success and to improve 'higher technical' routes will not thank Wooldridge for such a trite example.

In reality, if the growth in academic endeavours is a problem, then it is not primarily the result of politicians forcing a hierarchy of educational routes on society in the face of the contrary demands of voters. Yes, Tony Blair's 50% target put a particular focus on higher education but many policymakers from across the political spectrum have struggled to deliver parity of esteem – recent examples include Vince Cable, David Sainsbury and Gavin Williamson.

The failure to deliver parity of routes has more to do with school leavers opting for higher education in greater proportions than ever before and employers seeking out and – on average – paying handsomely for the talents of graduates. It seems surprising that a self-confessed meritocrat like Adrian Wooldridge does not welcome such a shift.

The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War (2020) by Peter Mandler

22 September 2020

One of the few academic books I purchased rather than borrowed, as a History undergraduate 30 years ago was Peter Mandler's *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals 1830-1852* (1990). Sadly, I do not remember much about the contents but I do still recall vividly how I felt when I read it. I was flabbergasted that anyone could cram quite so many thoughts into so few words. It was hard, as a young reader, to keep pace with the author's exceptional mind.

He has performed the same feat of compression in his new book, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education Since the Second World War*. This does not mean the volume of information thrown at the reader – from economists, social scientists and historians – is indigestible. Some academic books are like watery soup, where you have to work hard to track down the few morsels and others are stodgy, like my old school's dinner of (very) thick-crust pizza and chunky chips with bread and butter on the side. This book is more like a well-prepared restaurant meal with each tasty ingredient carefully balanced by the others. If it initially appears overly weighty or daunting, do not worry: four-tenths of the book are actually taken up by the Appendix, References and Index.

Although Mandler states at the start, 'This book is not a history of education in modern Britain', he is a historian and it is primarily a book about history. Sometimes, history is thought to be the story of how we came to be, with the past as the building blocks of the present. But there is little new under the sun in education policymaking and when historians put the past up front and centre, it can seem more like the present is an echo of the past rather than the other way around. That

is when history gets really interesting – and why policy wonks who say history has little to teach us have it so badly wrong.[40]

The bulge and the trend

There are chapters on education before the Second World War, on the provision of free secondary education after the War, on higher education, on subject choice and on social mobility. Some regular readers of HEPI's blog might, at first glance, question the relevance of the early chapters on schooling to today's higher education policy debates but they are just as pertinent as the later chapters that are actually focussed on higher education. Take these three examples.

First, Mandler recalls that the provision of secondary education after the Second World War was determined by the 'bulge' (the post-war baby boom) and the 'trend' (the tendency for people to stay in education for longer). These are precisely the same factors that are exerting pressure on higher education institutions today.[41] One of Mandler's original insights is to see the growth in better secondary education as emerging from below, with the public (especially mothers) exerting pressure on policymakers. He rejects the standard alternative narrative that educational expansion came from above, with patrician politicians gradually but haphazardly opening up opportunities. The bottom-up approach echoes down the decades in debates about higher education as growing pressure for more higher education tends eventually to overwhelm even those governments which think they can limit access.[42] It is for this reason that I would be willing to bet Gavin Williamson will fail in his apparent attempt to push higher education participation back below Tony Blair's recently-surpassed 50% target.[43]

40 **https://x.com/miss_mcinerney/status/1253687353929093120?s=20**

41 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/HEPI-Demand-for-Higher-Education-to-2030-Report-105-FINAL.pdf

42 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/19/new-restrictions-on-university-places-could-create-unlucky-generations/**

43 **https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/09/ministers-to-ditch-target-of-50-of-young-people-in-england-going-to-university**

A second parallel between the present and the past debates of which Mandler writes relates to technical education. The so-called 'tripartite' model of secondary modern, technical and grammar schools, which people often assume was meant to take full effect after the Second World War (but which predates the War as a concept and is not actually in the Butler Act of 1944), failed to take full root. Mandler shows this was partly because of the lack of demand for a separate stream of institutions focusing exclusively on technical education, which were regarded as inferior. He writes, 'they seemed second-rate next to grammar schools, they offered no obvious advantages in the labour market, and allocation to them seemed just like another means test to separate the privileged from the not.' If the bulge and the trend confound Gavin Williamson's hopes, these enduring arguments may similarly confound the hopes of David Goodhart and his fellow travellers, who want to build a major new technical track.[44]

A third parallel comes in the post-war debates about 'grammar schools for all'. This concept appealed to many working-class families fed up with underfunded education in inferior buildings. But 'grammar schools for all' appeared nonsensical to those who believed in elites. The same debate plays out today between those who think 'higher' education should be limited to those who have been able to secure a decent number of UCAS tariff points and those who think our selective higher education system should be replaced by a more universal one, open to all or nearly all. In one corner stand those who want to remove support for students deemed not to have the required aptitude, which was floated by the Augar panel of 2018/19 as well as the Browne panel of 2009/10, which recommended that student finance'is in the future determined by a minimum entry standard,

44 **https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-training-opportunity-in-the-crisis-.pdf**

based on aptitude.'[45] In the other corner stand academics like Tim Blackman, policymakers like Matthew Taylor and commentators like Sonia Sodha, who want to see a 'comprehensive' university system.[46]

So, in many ways, the education debate has merely moved up the age range. Mandler rightly gives centrality to demography, writing that 'Educational policy is uniquely sensitive to demography' (though in general it still seems amazing to me how little we speak about longevity when discussing education policy).[47]

Demand-led and bottom-up

The chapters on higher education include an excellent summary of how the Robbins report came to envisage and foretell the great expansion it did. But here the book's idea that pressure for more formal education has tended to be demand-led and bottom-up is necessarily less original. The work of the Robbins committee's statisticians and Lionel Robbins's own distrust of manpower planning mean the Robbins report has long been recognised as a demand-driven document.

The sections of Mandler's book on higher education do serve as a useful reminder, however, that in the decade after Robbins, growth in higher education participation among young school leavers temporarily stalled. One Secretary of State for Education and Science, Keith Joseph, actually opposed the Robbins-style expansion and expected to be able to hold down growth. In practice, as Mandler recounts, this was not entirely successful and, just after Joseph had been replaced by Ken Baker, Joseph's own major school reform of replacing CSEs and O-Levels with GCSEs took effect, putting rocket boosters on growth.

45 **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf**

46 **https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/17/britain-universities-comprehensives-academic-selection**

47 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/01/06/why-we-need-to-talk-about-life-expectancy/**

My own cohort was the first to take GCSEs, back in 1988, and it is surely no coincidence (though I have never seen an explicit link made by any policymaker or academic) that we were also the first (modern) cohort of freshers to face student loans on entering higher education just two years later, for loans were a way to hold down the costs of expansion.

It is challenging for anyone to assess fairly accounts of reform that they have been personally involved with, so feel free to take the next few paragraphs covering Mandler's review of the Coalition's higher education reforms with a big pinch of salt (for I was a minor cog as the special adviser to the Minister for Universities, David Willetts, between 2010 and 2013).[48] But while Mandler seems to me to get most of his account of higher education since 2010 right, there are elements that grate. For example, it is not true that the 'Browne [report] recommended a much higher fee – up to £9000 p.a.'. It actually recommended the complete removal of a tuition fee cap, with a much contested escalating levy to limit the public subsidy on any fee above £6,000 (as well as to discourage universities from charging extortionate amounts).

This apparently minor error matters in part because Mandler's primary argument is that politicians play a lesser role than most accounts of education policy attest. Yet this is one area where politicians rejected the advice proffered from outside and opted for their own alternative approach. Whether the decision was the right one or the wrong one, the current English fee system implemented in 2012/13 has – despite numerous claims that it is unpopular and unsustainable – now lasted longer than either Tony Blair's £1,000 fee regime of 1998/99 to 2005/06 or his £3,000 fee regime of 2006/07 to 2011/12.[49]

There is very little in the book with which I disagree, with the one important exception of where Mandler claims the Coalition's removal

48 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03054985.2016.1184870?needAccess=true**

49 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418**

of student number caps was of no great importance. For example, he claims, 'there is no evidence that these [student number] controls had much effect on access to higher education'. Yet when I started working on higher education policy, one of my first tasks was to calculate the huge and growing number of people then applying to higher education who were failing to get a place. Around the time of the 2010 election, the BBC were reporting the comparable calculation by one vice-chancellor of a modern university that 'Almost a quarter of a million people applying for university this year are going to miss out on a place' and noting that 'The number of applicants not getting a place will have doubled in two years.'[50]

Even allowing for considerable exaggeration in such figures, there were many young people who wanted to enter higher education but who were being blocked from doing so at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Combined with the growth in participation since the student number cap was removed (and the endless confounding of the pessimistic official forecasts on student numbers from the Office for Budget Responsibility), it is very hard to accept Mandler's argument that number caps did not limit access.[51]

After all, it was not just a happy coincidence that Tony Blair's 50% target for youthful higher education participation was (probably) hit in 2017/18 after the removal of student number caps.[52] It would not have been hit so quickly within the previous system of big fines for universities that recruited over their tight caps.

So I am mystified as to why Mandler did not fit the removal of student number caps into his overarching narrative that post-war politicians generally responded to demand when it came to the supply of

50 **https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10156398**

51 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/12/02/the-official-forecast-of-student-numbers-that-is-wrong-so-often-its-called-the-hedgehog/**

52 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/10/09/its-not-yet-true-that-half-of-young-people-go-to-university/**

education places. It would fit like a glove if he had. Instead, when presented with a clear and recent example of politicians responding to public demand, he paints it as effectively meaningless. It feels like the only constancy is his disdain for politicians, but given the political capital spent by Tony Blair, Nick Clegg and David Cameron on higher education that seems unfair.[53]

From mass to universal

It is perhaps churlish to point out gaps, given that this is such a comprehensive book, but I would have liked to have read more about Mandler's views on the introduction of the National Curriculum (which gets a few namechecks but is not properly considered), about the collapse in part-time higher education that has occurred this century and about the sharp drop in language learning.[54] If you are going to give credit to policymakers for the benefits to the STEM pipeline of encouraging triple science at GCSE, as Mandler does, then you should surely balance this by noting the catastrophic effects of their decision to end compulsory language learning at Key Stage 4. As Mandler himself notes at the start, there is also little about private schools, which have kept their tenacious grip on the education of wealthier families throughout the period in question.[55] However, there are of course good sources on all these issues available elsewhere.

Years ago, as Mandler notes on his very first page, people generally left education at age 10, then 11, then 12, then 14 – and eventually 15, 16 and 18. In future, it is likely to be 21. HEPI has a long tradition of publishing reports predicting likely future demand for higher education. Such predictions have a better track record than might

53 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Student-voters-Did-they-make-a-difference.pdf**

54 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/01/09/action-needed-to-avert-the-growing-crisis-in-language-learning/**

55 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/02/27/review-of-engines-of-privilege-britains-private-school-problem/**

be supposed (unless they come from the OBR …) and the reason is neither luck nor super-human predictive powers. It is that future student numbers have one variable that trumps all others: how many people make it to the end of schooling and successfully pass some school leaving exams (whether A-Levels, Advance Highers, BTECs or something else). In other words, the trend tends to be more important than any bulge.

If the progressive forces Mandler writes about continue, and assuming the regressive forces that want to see fewer people staying in education into their early 20s fail, then we will segue from a mass to a universal higher education system over coming decades.

In many respects, this is the book we have been waiting for and we should read Mandler's conclusions not as some dusty historical reflections but as a lesson on the stresses and strains that we are likely to face on the hopefully continuing – but not inevitable – journey of educational progress. We could not have a better guide.

Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem (2019) by Francis Green and David Kynaston

27 February 2019

The state of independence

This is a superb book. The two authors, one historian and one economist, each bring something to the party. Together, Francis Green and David Kynaston deliver a heady mix of economics, history, politics and policy. It is well written, with pace, dodging the wistful romanticism that infects so much of what has been written over the years about independent schools.

In some respects, it is perhaps the most wide-ranging assessment of the state of private schools in the UK for decades. On the other hand, there is a slew of other recent good books on the topic (both pro and anti), from Martin Stephen, David Turner, Robert Verkaik, Mark Peel and Alex Renton. Another, *The State of Independence*, with contributions from over 50 different authors (including – to declare an interest – me), will arrive soon.

So *Engines of Privilege* is unquestionably a good book, but it is also unusual because it tries to cover so much – probably too much – ground. For example, as well as offering some fairly objective history, it is a polemic on seeing off independent schools.

The book has already been widely reviewed elsewhere. A challenging piece in *The Times* said it may have the opposite effect of the one intended. Instead of fomenting anger against private schools, Hugo Rifkind claimed the descriptions of the independent sector are more likely to make people say, 'I gotta make sure my own kids are on the right side of that'.[56]

56 **https://www.thetimes.com/culture/books/article/review-engines-of-privilege-britains-private-school-problem-by-francis-green-and-david-kynaston-unjust-elitist-please-let-my-kids-in-mp9h9r76g**

So, much of what could be said has already been said. I shall focus instead on just two angles, and places where I disagree. Fittingly, given HEPI's function and the two authors' professorships, they are on policy and higher education.

Are bursaries the answer?

Green and Kynaston's policy solution to 'Britain's Private School Problem' (the sub-title of the book) is a 'Fair Access Scheme'. One-third of places at private schools would, initially, be reserved for state bursaries.

This is unexpected. Much of the book slams independent schools for harming the state sector by removing good staff and pupils. Creaming off 2% of the nation's children for state-subsidised bursaries at private schools (some of which would be academically selective) will not fix that. Indeed, independent schools have often argued that state-sponsored places would strengthen rather than weaken their sector.

The Fair Access Scheme resembles the Public Schools Commission's failed 1968 report (though that was on boarding more than day places), which I have written about elsewhere.[57] One member (the economist, John Vaizey) said the Commission's ill-fated proposals risked creating 'semi-comprehensive semi-grammar schools … making up their student body half from the tax-payer and half from the private fee-payer. These seem to me to be extremely odd schools.' Me too.

The authors' policy idea is influenced by the Sutton Trust's similar-but-different proposals. But I could find no mention of other more challenging research published by the Sutton Trust and produced for them by the Boston Consulting Group. This suggested sponsored places at independent schools could be the single least cost-effective social mobility intervention out of 12 that they tested.

It seems unfair for the book to castigate politicians and the media so strongly for not doing what the authors want, when the existing

57 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2010.518413**

evidence suggests there are far better ways for policymakers to spend their time and taxpayers' money.

Indeed, if the higher education sector were more willing to learn lessons from schools, we would have realised long ago that bursaries are inefficient. It is nearly a decade since legal action by private schools against the Charity Commission confirmed that bursaries are over-rated. Moreover if this were not enough, similarly ancient output from the old Office for Fair Access confirms the point:

> *The introduction of bursaries has not influenced the choice of university for disadvantaged young people.*
>
> *Applications from disadvantaged young people have not changed in favour of universities offering higher bursaries.*
>
> *Disadvantaged young people have not become more likely to choose conditional offers from universities offering higher bursaries.*
>
> *Since bursaries were introduced most of the increase in the participation of disadvantaged young people has been in universities offering lower bursaries.*[58]

Yet our highly-selective universities, and their donors, continue to splurge money on bursaries that would be better spent more parsimoniously on other things – for example, the University of Oxford has just announced even more cash for bursaries.[59]

This matters for one important reason above all: if we are not prepared to follow the evidence on what works, then we will not get heard when we complain about policymakers having widening participation budgets in their sights. Remember, Aim Higher went because of the shortage of hard evidence on the benefits of the programme.

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58 https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/1056/1/Have-bursaries-influenced-choices-between-universities-.pdf

59 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-47296701?intlink_from_url=&link_location=live-reporting-story

Snaffling the best university offers

A second reason why the book strongly opposes private schools, beyond pinching some of the best students and staff, is their success in 'snaffling for their own people the best university offers.' A fairer school system would, the authors say, provide fairer access to what they describe as 'the top universities'. That is true (though there are other ways to do it too – such as more contextualised admissions, which is also covered in the book).

But this, for me, is where the argument comes a little unstuck. It treats the most elite, autonomous and well-resourced schools as an embarrassing stain on society that should be removed, but simultaneously assumes our elite, autonomous and well-resourced universities are a welcome fact of life.

Similarities between our top private schools and our hyper-selective universities are real even if they are usually ignored. Both are much wealthier than their competitors, both disproportionately cream off people from certain sections of society and both offer cloistered environments away from the main thoroughfare of life.

Alan Bennett's infamous 2014 speech knocking independent schools is prayed in aid. He said:

> ***Private education is not fair. Those who provide it know it. Those who pay for it know it. Those who have to sacrifice in order to purchase it know it. And those who receive it know it, or should.***

But these crisp words were spoken in that holy of holies, King's College Chapel, Cambridge, so I have always assumed they bounced off the walls before fading to nothing.

In discussing the private school sector's weaknesses and its impact on society, we should not hold the schools to a different set of standards to the university sector. How can we reconcile condemnation of

independent schools for delivering success in the labour market for their pupils while celebrating highly-selective universities for doing the same for their students?

Yes, public schools and Oxbridge colleges are different, and – in part – differently funded. But if the authors' main motivation is to deliver more educational equality, it seems odd to challenge the extra resources and selective practices of independent schools while accepting as a normal part of life the extra resources and super-selective practices of our oldest universities. If private schools are 'engines of privilege', does not a cursory glance at the latest widening participation and employment outcomes data suggest Oxbridge colleges might be so too?

Tim Blackman's HEPI Occasional Paper on comprehensive universities shows there is another way of doing things.[60] He says the arguments for comprehensive education should be applied to university education, as in other countries. If the existence of elite independent schools sucks vitality from state-funded schools, perhaps a similar argument applies to higher education institutions?

One potential excuse for treating independent schools as a weakness while seeing our autonomous universities as a strength is: higher education is different. University, so the cliché runs, is not just big school. It operates on a higher plane and should be assessed differently. Perhaps that is so. But if we believe it, then surely we need to prove it?

Whataboutery

Some people will accuse me of 'whataboutery'. I am discussing a book about schools and have managed to make the review partly about universities instead. But is it right for university professors to condemn inequality in another part of the education sector without shining the spotlight on inequality in our own garden?

60 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Hepi-The-Comprehensive-University_Occasional-Paper-17-11_07_17.pdf

For the authors of *Engines of Privilege*, experience in other countries proves the UK does not need such an elitist private school system. But those other countries do not have such selective higher education systems either, and the one flows (at least in part) from the other.

The hierarchy of schools and the hierarchy of universities are intimately intertwined: a primary reason why people send their children private is to increase their chances of entering our exceptionally selective university sector near the top. So the two issues must surely sometimes be considered together.

In the end, if we are to judge elite schools and elite universities differently and to attack the former when its primary objective is to be a feeder to the latter, then we need a clear rationale as to why. This long book, which does so much so well, does not provide one.

The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education (2013) by Andrew McGettigan[61]

13 May 2013

This new book is more evidence that analysis of higher education is getting better. Other signals include Michael Shattock's *Making Policy in British Higher Education, 1945-2011*, which came out last year, and *Everything for Sale: The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* by Roger Brown and Helen Carasso, which was published earlier this year. As David Willetts noted in a recent speech, the LSE and the Institute of Education are preparing events to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Robbins report. Meanwhile, Wonkhe goes from strength to strength. This is all good news because the study of higher education as a discipline in its own right has been patchy in the UK.

Andrew McGettigan writes well, explaining detailed points of law and finance clearly. The book builds on his influential 2012 report for the Intergenerational Foundation, *False Accounting?*, which ingeniously claimed the current higher education reforms would not save money. This time, he takes a broader view, with sections on recent funding reforms, marketisation and privatisation. If the prose proves tough for general readers, that reflects the depth of analysis rather than other weaknesses.

The book is an interesting read because the author goes to unexpected places. Just when you think you know where he is heading, he veers off in a totally different direction. So, after laying the blame for higher education's woes squarely at the door of politicians and vice-chancellors, he concludes that most universities

61 This review first appeared on Wonkhe. It is republished here with the kind permission of their Editor in Chief, Mark Leach. The original piece can still be read at **https://wonkhe.com/blogs/review-the-great-university-gamble/.**

should have less independence from the state while a tiny minority should have more independence. That such a bifurcation would risk a new form of the old binary divide is no deterrent.

The author would not expect me to agree with his arguments and I do not. This is partly because they lack historical roots. He claims: 'Expansion of higher education began under Kenneth Baker'. This is unfair on earlier politicians and officials, local authorities and university administrators – not to mention Lionel Robbins. Later on, he says 'the government is no longer committed' to propping up failing institutions, but previous governments did not offer universities a guaranteed lifeline either.

There is an unfortunate tendency among writers on higher education to don rose-tinted spectacles when looking at the past and dark-tinted ones when looking at the present. McGettigan particularly condemns 'the botched loan scheme [which] means that the Treasury has insisted on an overall cap on student numbers.' But the need to impose a cap on the total number of students in order to limit the exposure of taxpayers is neither new nor unique to England. Politicians have grappled with the trade-off between student support and the number of funded student places for decades, as I attempt to show in a new article on the history of undergraduate support since 1962 for *Contemporary British History*.[62] Australia faces the same issue, with some experts warning the country will need to reverse their recent policy of lifting student number controls because of burgeoning costs.

There are other problems too. As well as lacking historical awareness, the book has an odd take on current policymaking. McGettigan repeatedly asserts that the Coalition's motives are concealed from view. The Government are proceeding 'without presenting its plans or reasoning to the public.' Opponents of the higher education reforms have been outmanoeuvred by politicians who call 'snap votes', 'sneak passages' into legislation and use 'existing powers *quietly*' (his italics).

62 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418**

This does not stack up. The students who poured into central London in 2010 were not protesting at being kept in the dark about the Government's intentions. The £9,000 tuition fee cap was announced in Parliament and later debated and voted on in both the Commons and the Lords. Other important elements of the student finance package, like the real interest rate, were in primary legislation that went through all the regular parliamentary stages. There has been a higher education white paper and an accompanying technical document as well as numerous public consultations on contentious issues, such as the regulation of alternative providers. Indeed, these documents provide much of the raw material for the book.

Because McGettigan believes policymakers' motives are concealed, he proceeds to reveal them. But conjecture is portrayed as hard fact. So recent changes to institutions' own number controls are 'a deliberate step in a process designed to destabilise them [universities] prior to the entrance and expansion of the alternative providers.' The potential benefits to students and to the sector as a whole of a more flexible and diverse higher education system are downplayed. Instead of explaining why policymakers would want to do all the things he ascribes to them, McGettigan assumes it is axiomatic that the goal is 'creating new outlets for value extraction.'

As part of this, he condemns the Government in fruity terms for meeting with higher education providers not funded by HEFCE. (In his words, they are 'privateers, private equity managers and other profit-making interests.') But any administration seeking to improve the regulation of alternative providers has a duty to try and understand them as part of evidence-based policymaking. The meetings between the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and alternative providers are referred to in the book but other meetings, such as those with the author, are not.

The most significant factual error is where McGettigan claims: 'Dearing recommended a means-tested upfront fee of £1,000 a year'. There are two problems with this. First, the Dearing report of 1997

recommended a flat-rate, not means-tested, fee. Secondly, it said the fee should be backed by an income-contingent loan, not paid upfront. The slip is unfortunate as it suggests the Blair Government's decision to implement a means-tested fee with no underlying loan was in line with Dearing, and therefore consensual. It was not. As Stephen Dorrell, the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, told the House of Commons at the time, it was 'a policy that was specifically examined and specifically rejected by Sir Ron Dearing and his committee'. Within a few years, it had been reversed.

There are alternatives to the Government's approach to higher education and Andrew suggests some. But they usually involve less responsive funding structures, higher barriers for new providers and more rigid student number controls. The Coalition could have set the size and shape of the higher education sector in aspic back in 2010 and slashed the unit of resource instead of shifting further towards loans, but it would have limited student choice, blunted incentives to improve the academic experience and hindered institutions trying to excel.

Overall, this book is polemical, lively and well written. But while its research on issues like the legal status of different institutions is thorough, its contentions are flaky. The book's objective, according to its Preface, is to be a primer on recent changes. I am not convinced it succeeds in this because it will be hard for disinterested readers to separate opinion from fact. Yet if you regard it instead as a lengthy political pamphlet, then you do not have to agree with it all to welcome it as a useful contribution to the debate.

B. Institutions and students

Storming the Ivory Tower: How a Florida College Became Ground Zero in the Struggle to Take Back Our Campuses (2025) by Richard Corcoran

4 August 2025

The tone of this new book by Richard Corcoran on 'Florida's most left-wing public university' is set at the very start with a tribute to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other newspapers for their 'unshakeable commitment to ignoring any fact that does not support their predetermined narrative'. It continues into the Foreword, contributed by the US conservative Christopher Rufo, which argues for 'institutional recapture' and 'reconquest'.

The main text begins, however, with a paean to 'liberal education', a defining feature of western education but also a particularly good way of describing some higher education in the US. It then recounts how, in early 2023, the Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, appointed six new trustees (including Rufo) to oversee the New College of Florida, which is the smallest institution in the State University System of Florida. The institution had only a few hundred students but was also a place that the American right thought had lost its way and needed saving.

Oversight versus autonomy

It is easy to forget on the UK side of the Atlantic, where we tend to associate university success with university autonomy, how much power state governors have over university systems in the US. The American model is akin to letting Andy Burnham decide who should govern the various universities in Greater Manchester. Or more pertinently perhaps, given the politics of the people involved, letting Andrea Jenkyns, the Reform mayor of Lincolnshire and former Minister for Universities, choose the board members of Lincoln University and Bishop Grosseteste University (soon to be renamed Lincoln Bishop University).

Those who choose the trustees of an institution indirectly choose who should manage that institution as it is trustees who hire and fire leaders and hold them to account. And in the case of the New College of Florida, DeSantis's six new trustees helped to install the author of this book, Richard Corcoran, as the institution's President in 2023.

Corcoran's core argument is that the changes wrought by DeSantis were necessary to rescue a failing institution to which those students who did enrol struggled to feel a sense of belonging. Admitted students (some of whom never actually enrolled) told researchers that the New College of Florida's social culture was 'politically correct' and shaped by 'druggies' and 'weirdoes'. Corcoran (rightly) points out this is 'the exact opposite' characterisation that 'any rational organisation would adopt if it was trying to appeal to a broad swath of students and parents.'

At just 650 students, the New College of Florida was only around half the size the local legislature had expected and, indeed, was smaller than the average secondary school in either the UK (1,000+ pupils) or the US (c.850), rather than boasting the typical enrolment of a higher education institution. That made a quick turnaround more feasible and Corcoran claims victory near the end of the book, arguing that, 'In a mere 10 months, New College of Florida went from one of the most progressively captured universities in the country to the freest university in the nation.' (This claim is caveated a little though, when Corcoran takes a dig at some of New College's longer-serving staff: 'I still have a small handful of faculty members who believe in leftist indoctrination.')

DEI, gender studies and 7 October

The story of the takeover / recovery of New College is told via chapters looking at:

- DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), which we are told was costly and ineffectual or even counter-productive;

- gender studies, which we are told has no place within the liberal arts; and
- the campus battles after the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas in Israel, which we are told exposed the power of 'unseen, unknown, unelected people who reside in large part in and around academia.'

The chapter on gender studies looks at the growth of the discipline and its arguably un-evidenced approach – especially towards the treatment of children with gender dysphoria. A succinct way to summarise it would be to say JK Rowling would likely approve of the chapter. But Corcoran ends with an important thought about why the way such issues are treated in academia matters: 'The real concern is not just the suppression of free speech, but what happens in society when dialogue around important issues is summarily dismissed.'

A later chapter focuses on the changes wrought by Corcoran and his allies, such as changing curricula, adding sports and improving campus facilities. He and his team clearly have the institution's and its students' interests at heart. But the level of public expenditure for such a small college seems extraordinary and some of it seems to have been spent unnecessarily. For example, some neglected student dorms were renovated at large expense only to be declared still unfit for humans to live in, meaning hotel beds had to be requisitioned.

It is striking that the reconquest of the institution was done via the actions of the state governor, the spending of considerable public money and the enforcement of strict rules. In other words, the tactics were interventionist rather than libertarian, even if the agenda was right-wing rather than left-wing. This helps explain why Corcoran is, unlike some other Republicans, opposed to abolishing the Department of Education, urging the American right to copy the left by using federal bodies to effect real change.

The other thing that really sticks out is how big a battle was fought over a college that educates something like 0.003% of America's college students (or 0.15% of Florida's). In terms of size relative to the

rest of the higher education sector, the New College of Florida is the US equivalent of something like the Dyson Institute here in the UK. So it is worth asking whether the campus battles are a trailblazer akin to Ronald Reagan taking on the University of California or whether they are more like the skirmishes seen here in the UK over institutions like Regent's University London, the New College of the Humanities (now Northeastern University London) and the University of Buckingham (where, to declare an interest, I sit on the Council). Corcoran himself seems unsure which they will turn out to be.

I. Did. Not. Give. A. F***.

At one point, Corcoran tells a story about his negotiations to eject a car museum which was on the New College campus and occupying much-needed space at a rent level that was far below the market value. This leads to some negative media coverage about which Corcoran writes, 'As to the press: I. Did. Not. Give. A. F***.' But there is an element of protesting too much here as there is page after page of settling scores and putting the record straight after numerous attacks on New College from many sides (including some parts of the media, staff and students and the Governor of another state [California]).

While it makes sense to discuss the media attacks on the New College of Florida's leaders in a book on the institution, the author cannot resist the temptation to broaden his text out to include earlier battles he fought with the media about COVID during his previous job as Education Commissioner of Florida, before delving even further back to recount his time as the 100th Speaker of Florida's House of Representatives. It is all diverting and somewhat interesting as a study of state-level politics, but it is not really on what the book professes to be about.

I do not blame the author for responding to the attacks; educational institutions that profess to be objective can sometimes struggle to accommodate members that hold anything other than the standard left-wing views that tend to predominate in education. But as a reader

on this other side of the Atlantic, I would have preferred more higher education strategy and less tittle-tattle. When you are trying to work out what lessons the battles over New College might hold for higher education outside the US, the settling of old scores with various local, national and specialist media outlets is less interesting.

Nonetheless, the book ends with a nine-point 'roadmap' for transformation, from 'Leadership is everything', through 'Litigate, litigate, litigate', to 'Presidents should have CEO capabilities'. Given it is so hard to find out what a Farage Government might mean for higher education over here, then this book may provide a bigger hint than Reform's last manifesto.[63]

Parting thought

When I've previously posted my assessment of books that are relevant to higher education and written from a right-of-centre perspective, I have received pushback. My far-from-adulatory review of one of Matt Goodwin's books, for example, won an excoriating comment from a former vice-chancellor: 'HEPI was set up as a serious evidence based think tank. It was not set up to dabble in phoney party political "culture wars".'

It is hard to disagree with the general sentiment on HEPI's purpose, but I do disagree with the notion that we should ignore books written from the right. It is important to understand the right's approach to higher education (on both sides of the Atlantic). If you draw a thick boundary around those books that are deemed acceptable to read and review and if that line excludes books like Corcoran's, there are two problems.

1. You play into the hands of – and give succour to – those who regard higher education as both insufficiently ideologically diverse and unwilling to engage with the full range of mainstream ideas.

63 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/05/22/hepi-policy-note-investigates-the-career-backgrounds-of-more-than-150-university-vice-chancellors/

2. You fail to draw a distinction between a right-wing stance, like Corocran's, which (whether you agree with it or not) is aimed at raising educational standards, and other right-wing educational escapades that are much less clearly about improving education.

Having also just finished reading *Trump U: The Inside Story of Trump University* by Stephen Gilpin, which lays bare the horror that was 'Trump University' and its get-rich-quick-at-the-expense-of-the-poor schemes which have nothing to do with academia, I am reinforced in my view that we should engage with all mainstream educational ideas irrespective of whether they emerge from potentially divisive Republicans such as Corcoran or somewhere else.

More Than Words: How to Think about Writing in the Age of AI (2025) by John Warner

26 March 2025

'ChatGPT cannot write.' It's a bold statement but one near the start of the new book *More Than Words: How to Think about Writing in the Age of AI* that explains what comes in the following 300 pages.

The author John Warner's persuasive argument is that generative AI creates syntax but does not write because 'writing is thinking.' (I hope this is the only reason why, when asked to write a higher education policy speech 'in the style of Nick Hillman', ChatGPT's answer is so banal and vacuous.) People are, Warner says, attracted to AI because they have not previously been 'given the chance to explore and play within the world of writing.'

Although Warner is not as negative about using ChatGPT to retrieve information as he is on using it to write wholly new material, he sees the problems it presents as afflicting the experience of 'deep reading' too: 'Reading and writing are being disrupted by people who do not seem to understand what it means to read and write.'

The book starts by reminding the reader how generative AI based on Large Language Models actually works. ChatGPT and similar tools operate as machines predicting the next word in a sentence (called a 'token'). To me, it is reminiscent of Gromit placing the next piece of train track in front of him as he goes. It is all a bit like a more sophisticated version of how the iPhone Notes app on which I am typing this keeps suggesting the next word for me. (When I click on the suggestions, it tends to end up as nonsense though – I have just done it and got, 'the app doesn't even make a sentence in a single note', which sounds like gibberish while also being factually untrue.)

'The result', we are told of students playing with ChatGPT and the like, 'is a kind of academic cosplay where you've dressed up a product in the trappings of an academic output, but the underlying process is entirely divorced from the genuine article.'

Writing, Warner says, is a process in which 'the idea may change based on our attempts to capture it.' That is certainly my experience: there have been times when I have started to bash out a piece not quite knowing if it will end up as a short blog based on one scatty thought or flower into a more polished full-length HEPI paper or end up as something in between. Academics accustomed to peer review and the slow (tortuous?) procedures of academic journals surely know better than most that writing is a process.

The most interesting and persuasive part of the book (and Warner's specialist subject) is the bit on how formulae make writing mundane rather than creative. Many parents will recognise this. It seems to me that children are being put off English in particular by being forced to follow the sort of overweening instructions that no great author ever considered ('write your essay like a burger', 'include four paragraphs in each answer', 'follow PEE [point / evidence / explain] in each paragraph').[64] Warner sees AI taking this trend to its logical and absurd conclusion where machines are doing the writing and the assessment – and ruining both.

Because writing is a process, Warner rejects even the popular idea that generative AI may be especially useful in crafting a first draft. He accepts it can produce 'grammatically and syntactically sound writing … ahead of what most students can produce.' But he also argues that the first draft is the most important draft 'as it establishes the intention behind the expression.' Again, I have sympathy with this. Full-length HEPI publications tend to go through multiple drafts, while also being subjected to peer review by HEPI's Advisory Board and Trustees, yet the final published version invariably still closely resembles the first draft because that remains the original snapshot of the author's take on the issue at hand. Warner concludes that AI 'dazzles on first impression but … has significantly less utility than it may seem at first blush.'

64 **https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxhjsg8/revision/3**

One of the most interesting chapters compares and contrasts the rollout of ChatGPT with the old debates about the rise of calculators in schools. While calculators might mean mental arithmetic skills decline, they are generally empowering; similarly, ChatGPT appears to remove the need to undertake routine tasks oneself. But Warner condemns such analogies: for calculators 'the labor of the machine is identical to the labor of a human', whereas 'Fetching tokens based on weighted probabilities is not the same process as what happens when humans write.'

At all the many events I go to on AI in higher education, three areas always come up: students' AI use; what AI might mean for professional services; and how AI could change assessment and evaluation. The general outcome across all three issues is that no one knows for sure what AI will mean, but Warner is as big a sceptic on AI and grading as he is on so much else. Because it is formulaic and based on algorithms, Warner argues:

> ***Generative AI being able to give that 'good' feedback means that the feedback isn't actually good. We should instead value that which is uniquely human. … Writing is meant to be read. Having something that cannot read generate responses to writing is wrong.***

The argument that so many problems are coursing through education as a result of new tech reminds me a little of the argument common in the 1980s that lead pipes brought down the Roman Empire. Information is said to become corrupted by AI in the way that the water supposedly became infected by the lead channels. But the theory about lead pipes is no longer taken seriously and I remain uncertain whether Warner's take will survive the passage of time in its entirety either.

Moreover, Warner's criticisms of the real-world impact of ChatGPT are scattergun in their approach. They include the 'literal army of precarious workers doing soul-killing tasks' to support the new

technology as well as the weighty environmental impact.[65] This critique calls to mind middle-class drug-takers in the developed world enjoying their highs while dodging the real-world impact on developing countries of their habit.

In the end, Warner's multifarious criticisms resemble just a little too much the attacks in the early 1980s by the Musicians' Union on synthesisers and drum machines. In other words, the downsides may be exaggerated while the upsides might be downplayed.

Nonetheless, I was partially persuaded. The process of writing is exactly that: a process. Writing is not just mechanical. (The best young historian I taught in my first career as a school teacher, who is now an academic at UCL, had the worst handwriting imaginable as his brain moved faster than his hand / pen could manage.) So AI is unlikely to replace those who pen words for a living just yet.

Paradoxically, however, I came to wish the author had run his text through an AI programme and asked it to knock out around 40% of his text. Perhaps current iterations of generative AI cannot write like a smart human or think like a smart human, but might they be able to edit like a smart human? Perhaps AI's biggest contribution could come at the end of the writing process rather than the beginning? Technology speeds up all our lives, leaving less time for a leisurely read, and it seems to me that all those 'one-idea' books that the US floods the market with, including this one, could nearly always be significantly shorter without losing anything of substance.

65 **https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/rcna81892**

Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite (2024) by Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman

15 October 2024

As the last book I reviewed on the HEPI website was by Sam Freedman, it seems a ripe moment to review the new book by Sam Friedman – and his co-author Aaron Reeve.

Once the lengthy throat clearing at the start is out of the way, *Born to Rule* uses extensive social science research – largely based on entries in *Who's Who* – to show today's posh people like to downplay their backgrounds: '43 percent of elites who told us in our survey that they are from working-class backgrounds actually come from professional, middle-class families.' In a nod to Pulp, the book's concluding sentence refers to 'the pernicious cosplay of an elite masquerading as common people.'

This claim is partly based on showing how the elite have become less highbrow in their professed tastes, more often choosing pop when on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. But as this tends to mean the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan, they 'may simply be a new kind of snob; a somewhat stealthy popular culture snob.' This is, apparently, not an accident. The elite opt 'to project ordinariness' because growing inequality and a decline in deference have combined to undermine their security.

This picture is generally persuasive but it is also contestable on the details. Take the authors' argument that, as part of their claims to ordinariness, today's *Who's Who* entrants are more likely than their predecessors to mention regular pursuits, like spending time with their children, as one of their recreations. But perhaps this is because people do spend more time with their children these days.[66] Is the

66 **https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/11/27/parents-now-spend-twice-as-much-time-with-their-children-as-50-years-ago**

keenness of elite people to claim they spend more time with their children really mainly down to concealing a love of Wagner?

When Friedman and Reeve turn to education, they focus on nine elite private schools (including Eton, Winchester and Wellington), which they argue inculcate 'a sense of one's exceptionalism.' This comes from three sources: the sifting that occurs when such schools decide which pupils get in; the broad curriculum; and the general environment among classmates, which nurtures 'distinct identities'. It is hard to argue against this, but the authors downplay something important when comparing their nine elite traditional private schools to the mass of schools. It is not just the fees, the curriculum and the pupils' backgrounds which have made the former schools so different: it is their residential nature, as pupils spend two-thirds of the year away from their families. This fact is not entirely ignored but neither, to use one of the authors' own favourite terms, is it 'foregrounded'.

When it comes to universities, the focus is almost entirely on Oxbridge. The data suggest Oxford and Cambridge rose, fell and then rose again when it comes to the relative likelihood of their graduates entering the elite. Men born before 1940 who went to Oxbridge and then joined the elite could sail through their degree courses without doing much work (though it was not, apparently, always the same for the few women). In contrast, later Oxbridge students of both genders found the institutions to be properly academic and worked harder: the proportion of Oxford students with third-class degrees fell from 30% in the 1950s to 5% in the 1980s.

'Elite families, schools, and other institutions' felt forced to respond by improving their school exam grades and broadening their extra-curricular activities. The goal was to recapture Oxbridge, which they duly did. Oddly, in their telling of this story, the authors pretty much ignore the culling of state grammar schools as well as the shoving of direct-grant schools into the fully independent sector by Shirley Williams. Any conversation on the share of private school kids at Oxbridge in the period from the 1940s until today that largely ignores such shifts feels incomplete.

The authors confirm that, if you want to maximise your chances of entering the elite after attending Oxbridge, it helps to come from a really wealthy family. Their scratchy calculation suggests you are five times more likely to enter the elite if you come from a very rich family and attend Oxbridge than if you come from a more modest background and attend Oxbridge. And the authors make it clear that they see the existence of two (or more) Oxfords and two (or more) Cambridges: in other words, the experiences of entrants with advantaged backgrounds can be radically different to those of people from more humble backgrounds. (The bifurcation of the student experience more generally across the sector is discussed in the latest HEPI / Advance HE, *Student Academic Experience Survey*.[67])

Reeves and Friedman suggest it is the way they link elite composition to the distinct balance of political views within the elite that is their 'biggest contribution.' Or to put it another way, as the book goes on it becomes less an analysis of elites and more a paean for progressive politics.

There is a faint air of disappointment whenever members of the elite do not share the left-wing views of the authors. This is clearest in the chapter on women. The interviews with female members of the elite, we are told, 'problematise the idea that the progressive attitudes of elite women necessarily translate into a common political agenda for change.'

Moreover, even though women are increasingly found within the elite, there is 'little evidence that they are more likely than the men they are replacing to pursue changes that disrupt the status quo.' Women who espouse the tension between opening up elite education and what it might mean for their own families are displaying the type of views that have 'always plagued progressive politics.' Even when women in the elite have worked to further equality, it has been too small scale to 'meaningfully change the policy agenda.' At moments, *Born to Rule*

67 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/SAES-2024.pdf**

reads almost as if the growing number of women in the elite have let down the two authors by not being sufficiently more progressive than their male counterparts.

The argument is taken further in the chapter on ethnicity, which suggests people who categorise their ethnicity as 'Other' and who express views that are often comparable with the answers from white people may be taking part in 'an act of self-preservation against a hostile white majority elite'. This is not entirely convincing, at least to me, given the 'Other' people in question have all made it into the elite.

Just 3.5% of the book is taken up with policy ideas for tackling the identified problems. The authors admit, 'Sociologists tend to be better at diagnosing problems than proposing concrete solutions.' Whether that is right, it is true the policy ideas are not fully formed.

One is to restrict privately educated people to 10% of places at Russell Group universities. So St Andrews could take as many Etonians as it likes but Cambridge could not. Moreover, if Oxbridge or Durham, say, disliked the imposition of such a rule, they could presumably just stop paying their annual Russell Group sub? And if families opting for private education were put off by any new quota, we would likely see a big increase in the number of Brits opting to get their higher education abroad.

The aim of the cap on independently educated applicants seems to be to reduce the proportion of families that use independent schools, thereby pushing more kids into state schools, thereby pushing their parents to start lobbying for more spending on state schools. Even if this goal makes sense, there are a lot of ifs and buts on the way.

The recommendations also include instituting a lottery for Oxbridge entry, which is more interesting but still a little odd. Friedman and Reeves seem to envisage the top 5% of students being put in a lottery for Oxbridge places. As this is designed to level up the geographical spread of Oxbridge entrants (unlike other ideas for using lotteries for

entry to successful educational institutions[68]) it seems people would be entered in the lottery whether they want to be in it or not.

No one would claim Oxbridge entry is completely fair now and no doubt this proposed model could bring about some positive changes, but it would also mean putting pressure on people to go to Oxbridge who do not want to study there, which feels bad for some people's mental health and unlikely to inculcate a sense of belonging among students. And many of the stellar Geordies pushed towards Oxbridge by such a system might actually prefer to study at, say, one of the ancient universities over the border in Scotland, some of which are geographically a lot closer than either Oxford or Cambridge. Moreover, Oxbridge is, as Friedman and Reeves unequivocally show, one pipeline for joining the elite but it is not the only one – plus not everyone believes their life's fulfilment rests in joining the elite anyway.

In the end then, the book feels topsy turvy. The recommendations make out we need to reform traditional educational institutions not for educational reasons but primarily because it might change the make up of the elite in modern Britain, and in a political cause. It is reminiscent to me of nothing so much as those who want proportional representation because they think it will usher in permanent left-of-centre governments or those who support Scottish independence because they think it might similarly lead to perpetual 'progressive' politics. But if we are to rip up so much, are there not stronger arguments for doing so?

68 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HEPI-Policy-Note-20-Social-Mobility-Challenge-FINAL.pdf**

The Career Arts: Making the Most of College, Credentials and Connections (2023) by Ben Wildavsky

21 December 2023

This short and timely book is aimed at 'anybody seeking to understand how to get ahead', which is presumably most people – although, in reality, I suspect it is more likely to be read by careers advisers, human resources staff and policy wonks (like me) than it is to be pored over by students or aspiring students.

Much of the evidence brought skilfully together by the author Ben Wildavsky promotes familiar lessons – for example, that so-called soft skills can be just as important as job-specific ones. But as the sources are generally from the US, the book provides a reminder that these lessons are not limited to the UK or to our own labour market and productivity challenges.

Plato around a seminar table this ain't

Wildavsky usefully nails the idea that higher education is contrary to skills-based learning, noting that even the 'land-grant institutions' founded in the US over a century ago provide practical experience. He notes courses like Forensics, Accounting and Hotel Management are available in many such universities: 'Plato around a seminar table this ain't.'

For the same reason, I feel confused when UK policy makers complain about there being too many students while simultaneously wanting more people to do 'vocational education'. Where do they think some of the best vocational education occurs if not on degree programmes in higher education institutions – whether that is a university, an FE college or an independent provider?

The book also usefully reminds us that commitments by employers to end graduate-only recruitment are often not meaningful. They

may win headlines but, whatever the job adverts might say, hirers are still impressed by degrees when it comes to actual appointments: 'candidates with degrees are likely to hold a significant edge when the time comes to make a hire.'

Indeed, Wildavsky makes it abundantly clear that those headlines claiming degrees are no longer as helpful as they once were are often flat out wrong: 'Contrary to the popular disruption story, companies like Google have not abandoned traditional credentials.' Indeed, we are told Grow with Google online certificates 'aren't intended to prepare people to work at Google itself.'

Short courses (and the LLE)

If I were a Government Minister at Westminster searching for evidence to back the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), I would find a lot of indirect support in this book. The benefits of carefully chosen short courses are celebrated – whether for those without previous higher-level qualifications or for those who could benefit from some topping up or who want to change direction. Upskilling and reskilling.

Nonetheless, whether the LLE is the best option for those who might benefit the most from short courses remains in doubt. Jonathan Michie OBE, who was Joint Secretary of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education, has called instead for 'a genuine entitlement quite separate from the funding for the three-year degree. The fact it is meshed together has just made it confusing, messy and unhelpful.'[69]

We are also reminded by Wildavsky that short courses are often of most interest to those who already hold credentials: 'the majority of people seeking to build specific skills through tailored education programs actually have degrees already.' Learning begets learning. Yet

69 **https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/merging-lifelong-loans-and-degree-funding-messy-and-unhelpful**

Robert Halfon recently confirmed those returning to higher education and accessing the LLE will only 'be able to access their *residual* tuition loan entitlement.'[70] Many (most?) readers of this blog will be excluded altogether.

Turn on, tune in, drop out

It is not only Ministers who should fillet this book. If I were James Wharton or Susan Lapworth (Chair and CEO of the Office for Students respectively), I would find support here for the B3 subject-level metrics on continuation, completion and progression.

As Wildavsky reminds us, eight-in-10 of the 1.7 million people who start at a US community college each year hope to obtain a Bachelor's degree … but only 14% do so within six years. Moreover, 39 million Americans say they have 'some college, no degree'.

These people have generally seen a poor return on their initial investment. Given the relatively low drop-out rate on this side of the Atlantic, I cannot help wondering – a little mischievously perhaps – whether the US needs B3 more than we do.[71]

The strength of weak ties

The book has a lot of detail about 'the strength of weak ties' (named after one of the most cited social science papers ever).[72] In this case, the focus is on how large networks can help graduates achieve rewarding first jobs, which often then set them up for successful career trajectories.

70 **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-halfon-speech-at-the-committee-of-university-chairs**

71 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-short-guide-to-non-continuation-in-UK-universities.pdf** - a newer HEPI Policy Note on the same issue is here: **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Dropouts-or-stopouts-or-comebackers-or-potential-completers-Non-continuation-of-students-in-the-UK.pdf**

72 **https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392**

There are more poor students than there used to be and they have to take on routine jobs just to pay the bills while other students can take on glamorous internships and placements. Moreover, the pandemic increased isolation and worsened mental health. So the challenge of helping those with great talents but few connections clearly remains as important as ever.

Many organisations work hard to tackle the reality that disadvantaged students tend to have less meaningful networks – in the past, HEPI has worked with some of them (such as JobTeaser, Gradcore and Handshake). The goal of such organisations is to broaden the applicability of the old saying, 'It's not what you know, it's who you know.' Wildavsky puts it like this:

> ***it's encouraging that, for low income students seeking to build career success with modest inherited networks, education and skills are increasingly recognised to be necessary but not sufficient. Social capital shouldn't have to play second fiddle any longer.***

It would be churlish not to welcome this, though I worry about basing initiatives on that other old motto, 'if you can't beat them, join them'. We could be missing something important when we act as if the best way for disadvantaged students to succeed is for them to copy their advantaged peers. Wildavsky hints at this problem himself in a couple of pages at the very end of his short book; he instructs students to 'Prepare for the world as it is, not as you wish it were'.

That makes a lot of sense but, as we look to a new year and think about resolutions for the future, it seems regrettable that we have not done more to organise the graduate jobs market in such a way that opportunities are more equal from the off. Should we collectively aim to put less of the responsibility for broadening access to the best paid professions on the shoulders of disadvantaged students themselves?

It is surely not fair to expect those struggling to make the jump from education to the labour market to act in the same way as if they had been born with a silver spoon in their mouths.

Head Hand Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century (2020) by David Goodhart

23 October 2020

We are spoilt for choice when it comes to interesting new books on education policy at the moment, which is why HEPI's blog has been running more book reviews than normal.

One of the most thought-provoking is the new book by David Goodhart, the old Etonian son of one of Margaret Thatcher's Ministers. He recounts in *Head Hand Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century* how he has journeyed from the far left, via the centre left, to the political centre – though he now works for a centre-right think tank and some of his views find support on the traditional right. We have already run one review of his new book, but it is so wide-ranging that there is plenty more to be said so are running this unprecedented second piece.[73]

Goodhart is not the first person to have made a living using their brain and writing skills only to discover later in life a profound and romantic respect for working with your hands. Judging by his references, he has been heavily influenced by the last book to make waves on a similar theme, Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* from 2009 (published in the UK as *The Case for Working with Your Hands: Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*).

There is much useful material in Goodhart's book. The early section provides a useful summary on the history of measuring intelligence, on the latest evidence about the balance between innate ability and one's environment (boringly, as many parents have long suspected, it is

73 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/10/02/has-universities-success-gone-to-their-head-at-the-cost-of-their-heart-review-of-david-goodharts-new-book-by-dean-machin/**

around 50% nature and 50% nurture) and on the extra weight applied to cognitive ability in 'meritocratic' societies (like the UK and the US).

I also felt drawn to the overall argument about how the education system and wider society exalt one form of activity (head) over others (hand and heart) to an excessive degree. It reminded me of the complaint of one of my teachers that my GCSE options included Latin but also Craft, Design and Technology. You were meant to go down one track or the other; the fact I was the only pupil in the school to choose both options rather confirms Goodhart's point that we have driven a wedge between different types of learning. (Today, I use the scant facts I remember from each of those two subjects to roughly the same degree. My foreign language skills are as poor as my DIY.)

So this is a good book and well worth reading. Yet I do not agree with it. Much of the book is an attack on the expansion of higher education, and specifically universities, as if this must naturally and inevitably flow from Goodhart's prior analysis. I doubt that is so. The book is a polemic about the importance of balance that, like all powerful polemics, is not very balanced. In particular, there are three omissions: longevity; choice; and curricula.

i. Longevity

Goodhart and many other people argue that students who opt for traditional three-year degrees spend too long being educated and they want to see more people doing shorter courses.

Yet as is regrettably normal for books on education policy, Goodhart ignores changing life expectancy almost entirely. By my count, there is somewhere between one and three sentences on it, depending on what you include, or – at most – one in every hundred pages.

Yet in my view, rising life expectancy is the single most important thing to consider when understanding how long someone might reasonably stay in formal education.

When the school leaving age was moved to 12 in 1899, contemporary life expectancy was in the late 40s, so someone could expect to spend around 26% of average life expectancy being educated through their early years and in school. When the school leaving age was increased to 14 after the First World War, life expectancy reached nearly 50, so the proportion of average life expectancy spent before leaving compulsory education grew to 29%.

Someone who goes to university for a three-year degree now (and remember only around half of young people receive any higher education) will pass 26% of today's life expectancy before leaving education. That is the same proportion expected from *everyone* when Queen Victoria was on the throne, back when the economy was ten times smaller. It is also a *lower* proportion than we expected back in the 1920s.

Indeed, anyone who has just completed a three-year PhD on top of a three-year Bachelor's degree will only just have surpassed the proportionate time *all* people were expected to stay in education 99 years ago.

As life expectancy has grown, we have spent more hours and, I suspect, a higher proportion of our lives shopping, going on holiday and on other leisure and consumption activities. Yet we have been spending a lower proportion of our lives in education. Now, some people want to see the figure pushed even lower through people taking fewer three, four and five-year degrees and doing more shorter courses instead.

It is not only because I work in education and believe education is generally a force for good or that employers need highly-skilled employees that I think this is odd; it is also because I believe education should be enjoyable and that the time we spend in education should grow at least in line with other activities. Why is it that people have come to regard what seemed natural to our forebears – more education – as elitist rather than progressive?

ii. Choice

Goodhart is not alone in seeing problems in Tony Blair's target of ensuring half of all young people experience some higher education. One specific problem he identifies is that Blair gave 'little thought to the psychological impact on those not going to college'. In many ways, Goodhart's book is a paean to the past, when blue-collar jobs were better respected and more women stayed at home rather than went out to work.

However, while so-called 'academic' higher education is often much more technical in nature than Goodhart allows for, it is not obviously clear that young people are wrong to avoid more 'vocational' options. Goodhart presents evidence showing graduates are more likely to 'love' their jobs and that skilled tradespeople have fallen behind others, for example in terms of pay increases, in recent years. But he is nonetheless certain that, in relation to practical skills, 'the next few years are likely to see a sharp uplift in pay in many of these skilled trades'.

Even if the future is to be so different from the recent past, it is not clear how people can be persuaded to live their lives the way Goodhart thinks they should. He bemoans the decline of technical education in schools but exaggerates the popularity of technical education among parents and students beforehand (as shown in Peter Mandler's new history of post-war education). More recently, some University Technical Colleges (UTCs) have struggled: the latest research suggests those who enter UTCs at age 14 are much less likely to get five or more good GCSE grades than comparable students elsewhere.[74]

The other point made very powerfully by Peter Mandler is that the old polytechnics were not what the bring-back-the-polytechnics brigade think they were: 'What differences there were [between polytechnics and universities] arose not because of their closer links to employers but because of their greater openness to new [higher

74 **https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/revealed-utc-attainment-gap-pre-and-post-16s**

education] entrants, whose interests and abilities differed from those of traditional entrants.' Similarly, despite his backing of the US community colleges, Goodhart has to recognise that student choice has meant they have faced 'a drift away from more technical and vocational courses.'

It is doubtless true, as the general consensus suggests, that non-degree routes have had insufficient attention in recent years and that, as more people attend higher education, others can feel less secure. If a country is to shift from an elite to a mass to a universal system of higher education, there are bound to be jolts along the way.

Goodhart calls this the 15/50 problem because, when only 15% of your peers go to university there is no 'left behind' problem but when 50% do, there is. That may be true. Yet it is still a huge jump to assume the country should therefore have sent people down routes they did not favour and stuck forever on a low higher education participation rate while other countries surged ahead.

iii. Curricula

Like other wonks keen to do down elements of our higher education sector, Goodhart rarely delves into exactly what the courses he dislikes actually cover. His criticisms of UK universities are partly based on personal anecdotes from acquaintances on how higher education does not work out for everyone. Yet evidence is not the plural of anecdote. His criticisms are also partly based on one-dimensional graduate earnings figures, yet (as Goodhart himself admits at the end), 'Our conversations about education, including in this book, are far too economy-orientated'.

If I had ever wanted to push Goodhart's thesis that many higher education options are unsound (which I do not), I would have taken a different tack. For me, fairly or not, Michael Gove's old attacks on school standards started having real impact when he targeted what he saw as egregious examples of untesting courses. In one speech,

for example, Gove attacked Science GCSEs for asking about battered sausages, Languages A-Levels for not compelling students to read texts in their original language and English Literature at both GCSE and A-Level for focussing too much on contemporary authors.

Whether Gove had a valid point is not the issue; his accusations were crunchy enough to allow for a proper two-way conversation. But in higher education, the critics tend to level their criticisms in such a generalised way that a negative impression is created without providing specific complaints open to discussion or rebuttal. Let us have a conversation about courses instead. And by courses, I do not mean made-up ones, like Sajid Javid's recent claim about people studying 'agriculture with pop music' (yes, I searched the UCAS course list to check and it does not exist), nor do I mean taking the Mickey out of courses for their name rather than their actual content, workload and learning outcomes.[75]

Conclusion

Goodhart's book is key to understanding current debates on the value of higher education, although the case against is not as cut-and-dried as Goodhart makes out.

One other point in the book is bugging me. On the one hand, Goodhart argues that graduates often do not learn much that is useful and he questions the cost-to-benefit ratio of earning a degree. On the other hand, he notes that graduates who end up in non-graduate jobs (or jobs that were not deemed to be graduate level until relatively recently) can be frustrated and are not always very good at their jobs, which they may regard as beneath them. Goodhart's answer to this conundrum is to reduce the proportion of people who become graduates in the first place and to stop labelling some professions as being graduate level.

75 **https://x.com/carllygo/status/1313015079005290496?s=20**

Yet were he to be right that some degrees do not teach you very much and that graduates should not be filling these sorts of jobs, how would the world be a better place if the same people were to go straight into these roles rather than reaching them via higher education? Goodhart argues it would be better if fewer graduates had become teaching assistants with the role being undertaken by more 'conscientious school leavers' instead. But how many parents would agree?

Surely a better solution would be to ensure people do improve themselves while at university and then ensure their subsequent roles make the most of their aptitudes? If someone is a Languages graduate, say, who has ended up in a routine role where no language skills are necessary, why not alter the role so that more use can be made of their skills, perhaps in helping to build an export market for whatever their company does? If a graduate teaching assistant has skills that remain undeployed, why not see if more use can be made of them to the benefit of both the school and the individual? We could then prove the truth in the old saying that a graduate job can be any job a graduate does.

In the end, Goodhart seems over-confident about his fortune-telling skills, for example in relation to the future of the labour market, given we live in a fluid world.

The University Challenge: Changing Universities in a Changing World (2020) by Ed Byrne and Charles Clarke[76]

27 February 2020

Both politicians and vice-chancellors have been known to churn out books, including tomes on the future of higher education. But it is not often that a very senior vice-chancellor (of two different institutions on opposite sides of the world) and a very senior politician (who has been the UK's Home Secretary as well as the Secretary of State for Education and Skills) come together to write a book.

The end result marries the accessible messaging of politics with the deep expertise of an experienced university leader. It is challenging, taking a grand sweep across teaching, research, civic engagement, funding, accountability and the value of higher education. Topical issues such as free speech, climate change and the reliance on overseas students are covered too.

Mixing a politician and a vice-chancellor could have gone wrong, if – for example – the academic had brought an ivory-tower mentality and the politician had brought bombast. Thankfully, this book takes the opposite approach. Both the boring edges of insular university politics and the more partisan elements of national politics have been shaved off (except perhaps in the disappointing sections on student fees and vice-chancellors' pay, which try to settle too many scores). What is left is a coherent and thought-provoking take on today's systems of higher education around the globe, particularly in the Anglosphere.

One of the most important elements is the inclusion of dramatic social changes that we do not talk enough about, such as the impact of rising

76 This review first appeared in *Times Higher Education*. It is republished here with the kind permission of their Editor. The original piece can still be read at **https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/university-challenge-changing-universities-changing-world-ed-byrne-and-charles-clarke**.

life expectancy on demand for education. The book is similarly strong on the way the labour market has changed and the way research now happens on a truly interconnected global scale, traversing national and disciplinary boundaries.

I was not convinced by every part of the picture of fast and significant change. The authors set great store by the development of teaching-only private higher education institutions, but they say little about past problems in this space. These matter because authorities in the US and the UK have clamped down on new providers. Everyone I have ever met who has tried to get a significant new higher education institution off the ground in recent times has found it very much harder than they initially anticipated. So it is not clear how what Charles Clarke and Ed Byrne have in mind would work out in practice.

There are some nice surprises, particularly around the definition of what a university is. For years, the heads of the UK's most research-intensive institutions have tried to limit competition for the really big resources, like the huge slugs of research cash, to the 20 or 24 such institutions (often neatly coinciding with the number of members of the Russell Group at any given point). They have also traditionally tried to limit competition by pushing the idea that the word 'university' should really only be applied to institutions that do decent amounts of research.

This has been a woefully unsuccessful strategy because less research-intensive institutions with the title of university have responded by agreeing that they should indeed do significant amounts of research and then bidding for a fair share of the available cash.

Fortunately, Byrne and Clarke puncture the bubble. They say there is nothing wrong with being a teaching-only university. While they want more research cash funnelled towards the big research-intensive institutions, and particularly favour these, they suggest that it should reach 40 to 60 universities in the UK rather than a smaller number. In a section that might concern some of their senior colleagues,

such as finance directors, but find favour with enlightened student representatives, they also call for more transparency in spending on teaching and research.

Moreover, they recognise that some money has to be used to ensure a good regional distribution of high-class research as well as to recognise pre-existing excellence. That dual approach could work for the university sector as long as research and development spending continues growing (as Boris Johnson's government has promised) and a larger proportion of it continues to go to universities than in other countries (which is more in doubt). If not, something will have to give.

One other surprise in the book is the downplaying of institutional autonomy. There are warm words for many elements of autonomy and criticisms of how foreign autocracies treat their universities, as well as a few sharp words for England's Office for Students. But there is also a clear sense that autonomy has gone too far, as in the call for 'both top-down and bottom-up' approaches towards governing the sector. The question of whether full autonomy for individual institutions provides too little room for shaping the whole system is an interesting and thought-provoking one that our predecessors would have recognised. We have to hope the plea for more oversight is taken at face value by policymakers as a route to strengthen the sector further, rather than an excuse to trample on institutions whose members have sometimes challenged those in power.

I found the book least persuasive in its stargazing. It is useful to know how the authors think higher education is likely to develop. But there is a certainty about their predictions that may prove misplaced. Academic enquiry is generally associated with uncertainty but, here, many potential future developments are regarded as 'inevitable'. The authors even continue to herald the opportunities offered by massive open online courses when others have lost their initial enthusiasm. Their comment about how we will each soon have 'our own computational infrastructure connected to internet-facilitated mega computing facilities in the cloud' sounds a bit too much like the

way aged politicians talk about technology in The Thick of It to me (Silicon Playground anyone?), but perhaps they will be proved right.

The two authors are also convinced that part-time study is on its way back. It could be, and I hope it is. But all their reasons why this will happen (like the need for people to get more continuous professional development) have been true throughout the recent period of sharp decline in part-time study in England and it has not happened yet. So we may need new policy levers to ensure it does.

Sometimes, when politicians and even vice-chancellors speak, you know you are being spun a line. When that happens, I tend to think, 'If you are not thinking much about what you are saying, I am not going to listen very much.' Despite being written by one politician and one vice-chancellor, this book takes a different approach. The ideas are properly thoughtful and definitely worth engaging with. Above all, the authors' broad approach proves the truth behind my favourite sentence in the whole volume: 'A university is not simply an institution, it is a living, breathing, thinking community.'

Bluffocracy (2018) by James Ball and Andrew Greenway[77]

1 November 2018

This is an unusual book. It is a lucid attack on white, middle-class men in politics, Whitehall and the media written by two white, middle-class men working in the media, one of whom previously worked in Whitehall. It slams the University of Oxford's PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) course for teaching people to 'blag' about topics of which they know little. Yet the authors are two young PPE graduates with limited experience.

A third of the book is devoted to a detailed account of how to survive PPE at Oxford. This is unilluminating because the uniqueness of the course is exaggerated. For example, the authors claim that PPE owns the concept of an 'essay crisis', which is described as 'an obscure barb relating to one university degree' rather than the more general suffering that it is. At times, I was left wondering if they have ever met anyone with another degree from a different university.

The scattergun criticisms are also over the top. For instance, the book says that Westminster lobby journalists exist to enable government ministers to avoid speaking to specialist media. This is full-on nonsense. The lobby is there to report parliamentary affairs, and you only have to open a newspaper to see how often ministers interact with specialist journalists.

The proposed policy ideas for solving the supposed problems in how we are governed are minnows. Getting journalists to explain their incorrect predictions, having a little more scrutiny of officials by select committees and encouraging recruitment from the whole Russell Group, not just Oxbridge, are tiny changes if the problems identified in this book are anywhere near a true picture.

77 This review first appeared in *Times Higher Education*. It is republished here with the kind permission of their Editor, Chris Havergal. The original piece can still be read at **https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/bluffocracy-james-ball-and-andrew-greenway-biteback**.

Neither the lack of evidence nor the specific policy conclusions are the biggest flaw, however. It is the overarching narrative, which assumes all would be well if only we were to put the 'experts' in charge. That sounds lovely, but it leaves three questions hanging. Ironically, given the book's obsession with PPE, one is philosophical, one political and one economic.

First, to which experts should we listen? In higher education, are the experts the students, the staff or the arm's-length bodies with long institutional memories? It cannot be all of them because they often disagree and dialogue becomes bogged down. Indeed, non-experts are critical to good governance because they cure blockages. (The former special adviser Giles Wilkes has called this 'The Pyramid of Indifference' in which, 'Problems are solved only when they are raised to the level where they give less of a f*ck. It is the giving of f*cks that stops things happening.'[78])

Secondly, what does expertise mean? The authors assume that politicians, civil servants and journalists cannot be experts because they move from role to role and topic to topic. But this process makes them expert in, respectively, political matters, keeping the show on the road and conveying news. Those are vocational specialisms. It may be unfashionable to say so, but the UK's post-war economic success relied more on the skills and expertise of those in Whitehall and Westminster than luck or 'blagging'. So will delivering success after Brexit.

Finally, how can we give experts all the power when their main demand is generally 'more money'? That is not an answer because, once you have given the education and health experts their extra resources, you will not have enough left for those in defence and housing. Someone has to intervene. It is regrettable that the PPE graduates who wrote this book have forgotten that economics is, above all, the study of scarcity.

78 **https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/Wilkes_Hyde-policy-making-101.pdf.**

Student Lives in Crisis: Deepening inequality in times of austerity (2016) by Lorenza Antonucci

20 October 2016

I often wish there were more academics looking at higher education rather than just practising it, and it is rare indeed to come across a useful cross-country comparison like this one. The book's categorisation of students into five different groups depending on their outlook and financial position is particularly thought-provoking, and I am struck by the similarities as well as the differences across the three areas being studied: England, Italy and Sweden.

As part of this, there is a useful distinction between the present and the future. The author shows it is possible for a student to be pessimistic about the present but optimistic about the future and *vice versa*. Transitioning to university is a stressful time and so is transitioning to the labour market afterwards.

The book is especially powerful on three areas where I strongly agree with its findings.

1. **The importance of student wellbeing:** Our recent work on student mental health discusses that 10-12% of students consider themselves to have a mental illness, one-third 'always' or 'often' feel 'down or depressed' and a similar proportion 'always' or 'often' feel 'isolated or lonely'.[79] The HEPI-HEA data show higher levels of anxiety among students than among all adults and among young people as a whole.[80]
2. **The problems that can be caused by excessive term-time employment:** Needing to find paid employment during term-time does change your student experience and can be problematic – that

79 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/STRICTLY-EMBARGOED-UNTIL-22-SEPT-Hepi-Report-88-FINAL.pdf**

80 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2016.pdf**

is why Oxbridge tend to look askance at it. But we should remember it is not always bad: there is some evidence that working around 10 to 15 hours a week can actually help educationally, especially if the work is related to a student's degree.

3. **University is worth it for more than financial reasons:** The non-pecuniary benefits include greater civic engagement, less propensity to crime and even greater life expectancy. The author usefully reminds us that looking at financial returns alone is a poor guide to the value of higher education.[81]

So the book is well worth a read. But there are also three areas where I find less reason to agree with its conclusions.

First, the book talks a lot about how student loans 'privatise risk'. They can do so when they are badly designed, but I think that displays a misunderstanding of how our loans work. The author states loans 'assume equal returns in the labour market'. But when they are income-contingent they do not assume that all graduates are equal. In our system, the richest graduate pays back more than they borrow, the average graduate pays back less than they borrow and the poorest graduate pays zilch, with the generality of taxpayers filling in the large shortfall. Whatever the whys and wherefores of student loans, that is risk sharing – and in a progressive way. Indeed, some of the asides in the book suggest that students understand the key features, with many describing it as 'good debt'.

Secondly, there is lots about the impact of student loans on the financial position of individual students but there is nothing about the benefits of our fee system for student numbers and the unit of resource (the amount of funding per student). It is the loans system that allows the system to expand and to ensure there is sufficient money to educate each student, which was not the case in the recent past.

81 **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf**

Thirdly, the book claims, 'HE is the battleground where inequalities are most reproduced for young people in European societies at present.' It is unsurprising that a book focused on higher education should give such a primary role to higher education, but it is an exaggeration nonetheless. What about inequality between graduates and non-graduates, who are absent from the book?

Also absent are international students, who can face particular obstacles all of their own. Chinese students typically have no siblings as a result of the one-child policy, so the pressures they carry to succeed can be immense. I once heard of an Indian student who was being supported by his whole village to study at a UK university. The expectations placed on such people are enormous and more than rival some of the tougher cases in the book.

It would be wrong to end without noting how interesting the author is on parental contributions towards the cost of being a student. She notes there is an assumption of parental contributions, 'which doesn't always reflect the availability of family sources.' I think one of the biggest problems is a lack of information, which means parents do not know how much they are meant to contribute and cannot prepare in advance.

Indeed, I suspect there is a barely a parent in the country who knows precisely what their contribution is assumed to be. Fortunately, Martin Lewis, the self-styled Money Saving Expert (with whom I do not always see eye-to-eye on student finance[82]), has performed a great public service in designing a ready reckoner to answer that question. It shows parents can be expected to contribute in the region of £4,000 to £5,000.[83] That is more than in the past but, given the cost of accommodation, even that may not leave their student offspring with enough to live on.

82 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/07/28/why-the-moneysavingexpert-is-wrong/**

83 **http://blog.moneysavingexpert.com/2016/09/02/how-much-are-parents-supposed-to-give-their-children-when-they-go-to-university/**

C. Biographies and autobiographies

Lucky Loser: How Donald Trump squandered his father's fortune and created the illusion of success (2024) by Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig and *Bad Education: Why our universities are broken and how we can fix them* (2025) by Matt Goodwin

6 February 2025

Browsing in a good bookshop sure beats scouring the internet for things to read. And when I was recently in my local independent bookshop (the Book House in Thame since you ask), I stumbled across a new biography of Donald Trump focusing on his pre-politics business career. Seeing that the book, *Lucky Loser: How Donald Trump squandered his father's fortune and created the illusion of success* by Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig, included a section on Trump University, I snapped it up.

Every leader's weaknesses are clear before they rise to power if you look in the right places. We knew Gordon Brown's seriousness could merge into tantrums long before the revelations about throwing phones at staff came to light, and we knew Boris Johnson's *joie de vivre* hampered an eye for detail long before he caught the ball 'from the back of the scrum' and entered Number 10 Downing Street. If Nigel Farage ever makes it to the top job, as ever more people seem to be predicting, no one will be able to claim his destructive approach to politics was previously hidden.

Similarly, this new biography of Trump written by two *New York Times* journalists proves the US President's weaknesses were evident beneath the bluster throughout his long business career in hotels, casinos and golf courses. If the authors are right, Trump has long been prone to taking big risks on a hunch, to acting litigiously and to seeking credit for things that are not his doing. The title suggests he was a *Lucky Loser*, though perhaps that is just an uncharitable way of saying he was a big winner against the odds.

As a businessman, the book shows how Trump began lucky, with 'the equivalent of half a billion dollars from his father', and ended lucky, with 'another half billion as a reality television star'. This allowed him to take on huge debts, aided by paying as little tax as possible and reclaiming what tax he had paid whenever he could (as during Obama's Great Recession recovery programme).

Trump's dollars from the TV show *The Apprentice* came not so much from appearance fees as from his right to half the profits from any sponsorship deals and from lending his name to all sorts of businesses attracted by his TV success, from health supplements to early video phones. These enabled him to keep afloat. But there were many lows to Trump's business career and a number of his big projects were declared bankrupt in the 1990s and 2000s, leading the two authors to conclude, 'He would have been better off betting on the stock market than on himself.'

If there's one person responsible for Trump's rise to the top, it is Mark Burnett, a British veteran of the Falklands War who is now the United States Special Envoy to the UK. Burnett invented the TV programme *Survivor* before creating an urban equivalent in *The Apprentice* (and later also creating *The Voice*). And if there is one item responsible for Trump's rise, it seems to be vanilla-and-mint Crest toothpaste, as Proctor & Gamble were the first mass consumer company to do serious sponsorship of *The Apprentice*. They paid $1.1 million to get the contestants to come up with a new toothpaste, thereby drawing attention to the actual new vanilla-and-mint product sitting on shop shelves.

Ostensibly, this all has little to do with higher education. But Trump University (also known as Trump U) is one of the most notable of all the current US President's past projects and one of the ventures undertaken just before he stood for the Presidency for the first time. Trump not only lent his name to the project, he also invested millions of dollars in return for 93% of the business – like Victor Kiam, he liked it so much he bought the company. But the authors of this book conclude the whole thing was a disaster from start to finish.

Beginning as a way to sell recorded lectures to small and medium-sized businesses, Trump University quickly moved into get-rich-quick in-person seminars. The Trump Elite Gold programme had a fee of $34,995 (about the same as the entire cost of a three-year degree in England or Wales). Prospective learners were told, 'There are three groups of people … People who make things happen; people who wait for things to happen; and people who wonder, "What happened?"' If you wanted to be in the first group, you were encouraged to open your wallet or else borrow the necessary fee.

One failed applicant for The Apprentice, Stephen Gilpin, found himself tapped up to work for Trump U but later wrote an exposé that claimed, 'the focus for Trump University was purely on separating suckers from their money.' At the time, Trump said he hand-picked the instructors, but he did no such thing. The whole venture ended up in three major lawsuits, which were settled just as Trump became President for the first time.

In the end, the story of Trump University confirms a truism: it is vital to protect the use of the term 'University' and to police it actively and in real time. The book serves as a reminder that – as Jo Johnson has argued persuasively on the HEPI blog[84] – pausing new awards for University Title means the Office for Students is giving less attention to this area than it should.

It is ironic that the global leader of right-wing populism should not only have sought to establish his own 'University' but that, having done so, it should embody in such exaggerated form all the negatives that populists tend to ascribe to traditional universities: poor value for money; an unoriginal curriculum taught by ill-trained staff; and insufficient personal attention for students. However, if a newer book attacking UK and US universities, *Bad Education: Why our universities are broken and how we can fix them* by Matt Goodwin, is any guide to

84 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/01/28/the-office-for-students-needs-to-walk-and-chew-gum-by-jo-johnson/**

populism more generally, then the failure of Trump U has not deterred the attacks on places that actually do have the legal right to call themselves a 'University'.

Goodwin starts with a chapter called 'Why I decided to speak out' though it could just have easily been called 'The grass is always greener' or 'Looking back with rose-tinted spectacles'. The book's core argument is that:

> ***the rapid expansion of the university bureaucracy, the sharp shift to the left among university academics and the politicization of the wider system of higher education have left universities in a perilous state.***

As a result, Goodwin argues, 'our universities are not just letting down but betraying an entire generation of students.'

He notes that, as the number of EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) champions has gone up, some types of diversity, such as diversity in academic thought, have gone down. But Goodwin is a political scientist rather than a historian and the problems he identifies are not as new as he makes out. Far-left students used to disrupt Enoch Powell, Keith Joseph and Leon Brittan when they spoke on campus; now they try to block Helen Joyce, Kathleen Stock and Jo Phoenix. The issue of whether such individuals should be allowed to speak even if some people on campus will be 'offended' are the same. The recourse to legislation in response is the same too: the rows of the 1980s led to the Education (No. 2) Act (1986) and the rows of today led to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (2023).

Notably, Goodwin's views seem to have changed even more over time than the institutions that he criticises. Two decades ago, Goodwin was a progressive studying for a PhD under Professor Roger Eatwell, an expert in fascism and populism at the University of Bath, after which he moved to Manchester and Nottingham, where he worked with

political scientists like Rob Ford and Philip Cowley, and thereafter to the University of Kent. These days, Goodwin has not only given up his professorship but is found speaking at Reform UK meetings while accepting a job as a GB News presenter.

And while Goodwin says his book has been 20 years in the making, it reads like it was 20 weeks in the writing. That is not meant to be rude for the piece is pacey, personal and polemical – and all the more readable for that. But while it is based in part on others' research – including pieces of HEPI output – it generally draws from just one well: the place inhabited by Eric Kaufman, Jonathan Haidt and Niall Ferguson. The dust jacket includes endorsements from Douglas Murray, Claire Fox and Nigel Biggar among others.

Goodwin's pamphleteer-style of writing ensures his text has little in common with the meticulous research on recent university history by Mike Shattock or Roger Brown and Helen Carasso or Steve Jones. Nonetheless, whisper it quietly but – whether you like his general approach or not, whether you like his new acquaintances or not and whether you like his writing style or not – Matt Goodwin may have something of a point.

Universities do not always welcome or reflect the full diversity of viewpoints in the way that perhaps they should, given their business is generating and imparting knowledge. This has been said many times before by others, so it is far from original, yet that doesn't make it false. Goodwin quotes the US economist Thomas Sowell: 'when you hear university academics talk about diversity, ask them how many conservatives are in their sociology department.' It seems a fair question.

But grappling with that is not easy. The best answer, Goodwin argues, is a muscular response. Rather than leaving it to the sector to resolve its own issues, he wants to see hard-nosed interventions from policymakers and regulators:

only government action and new legislation, or pressure from outside universities, can change the incentive structures on campus. This means adopting a proactive rather than a passive strategy, making it clear that the individual freedom of scholars and students is, ultimately, more important than the freedom or autonomy of the university.

At the very end, Goodwin even argues someone should ensure 'all universities be regularly audited for academic freedom and free speech violations', with fines for any that transgress. Yet that begs more questions than it answers: we do not know who would do the audit or what the rules for it would be.

So there is a paradox at the heart of Goodwin's critique. He ascribes the problems he sees to flaws in the 'system' whereby the number of university administrators, institutions' central bureaucracy and the pay of vice-chancellors have all increased rapidly. Yet such changes have often reflected:

1. external influences, such as the increase in the regulation of education (in response to scandals of the Trump U variety);
2. the need to have flattering statistics (such as to present to the Treasury in the battle for public resources); and
3. recognition that the old ways of working are not going to root out inappropriate behaviours (for example, sexual harassment).

Perhaps making universities more accountable to regulators and policymakers will make them bastions of free speech in the way Goodwin hopes, but might it not just clog up the lives of academics even more?

One Boy, Two Bills and a Fry Up: A Memoir of Growing Up and Getting On (2023) by Wes Streeting

8 August 2023

There was recently a row when a 25-year old, Keir Mather, won the Selby and Ainsty by-election for Labour. The Conservative MP Johnny Mercer took to the airwaves to protest against Parliament becoming 'like the Inbetweeners.'[85]

In the US, there are stringent minimum ages for elected politicians – you must be 25 to be in the House of Representatives, 30 to be in the Senate and 35 to be President – and some would say for good reasons.

But if Pitt the Younger could be Prime Minister at the age of 24 back in the eighteenth century and if local voters want a younger adult to represent them, what is the problem? It is not as if all older leaders have unblemished records.

Moreover, some of the biggest social policy challenges faced in the UK are intergenerational ones, suggesting perhaps that multiple generations should be represented in the House of Commons to thrash out issues together. And anyone who has seen the best young students' union sabbatical officers operate would struggle to explain why youth should be a barrier against political involvement.

So perhaps there is no problem with younger politicians … except in one regard. People are interested in people who become young MPs precisely because they are young. But like most people, their biggest strength is also their biggest weakness. Young MPs have (comparatively) little experience, so their lives to date may not be as interesting as they hope. Plus when looking at a young MP's background, it is too early to know how it will subsequently end up shaping a lengthy political career.

85 **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEUpaOwYetQ**

The new autobiography of Wes Streeting. *One Boy, Two Bills and a Fry Up*, is a good example of all this. Presumably, it is mainly of interest to political nerds as well as higher education wonks, given Wes rose to prominence as President of the National Union of Students (NUS). But Wes does not reach university until page 232 and he does not enter Parliament until page 297, at which point there are only 11 pages of the book left.

This means there are around 15 pages for each of the first 18 years of Wes's life, under 5 pages for each year of his adult life before becoming an MP and, even including the moving Prologue on his cancer diagnosis, just three pages on each of his eight years as an MP. The result is a bit Adrian Mole.

Nonetheless, it is worth readers persisting because the final few pages are perhaps the most interesting, with Wes using case studies from his constituency work to argue that poverty today blights lives even more than it did when he was growing up in the East End in the 1980s and 1990s.

At the very end, Wes thanks those who persuaded him to excise stories about his time leading Cambridge University Students' Union (CUSU) and the National Union of Students – in other words, tales from his formative adult years. I am perhaps in a small minority (or maybe not among readers of the HEPI website), but I was left wanting to know more about Wes's time at Cambridge and leading the NUS. The offcuts sound like they might have been more interesting than some of the minutiae of Wes's childhood that is included. They might also have helped the tale rattle along by providing more breadth and variety.

A second big book of the summer is Caitlin Moran's *What About Men?*, which argues men are not always good at talking about their feelings, especially when compared to women. In the same vein, some reviews of Wes's book claim it tells a story without being very revealing about its subject. That is definitely true when it comes to higher education.

Take these five examples.

1. The Sutton Trust played a key role in Wes Streeting's life by putting him on one of their summer schools, thereby helping him secure a place at the University of Cambridge despite a less-than-stellar schooling. He rightly remains very proud of getting in to 'the world's third-oldest surviving university.' But despite being a Labour MP of eight years' standing, Wes avoids expressing a view on whether the original Sutton Trust model of handpicking poor kids for entry to elite institutions is in tune with left-of-centre views about reforming society or, rather, a way of protecting the existing establishment by helping to replenish it. Even if the Sutton Trust helped Wes get into Cambridge, we never find out how he *feels* about the other things it has lobbied for over time, such as getting the state to pay for places at the same academically selective private schools that the Labour Party now wants to tax to the hilt.
2. We are told that Wes was so angry about the introduction of Tony Blair's £3,000 'top-up fees' as well as the invasion of Iraq that he left the Labour Party in 2003, aged 20. So how does he *feel* now about sitting in a Labour Shadow Cabinet that defends much higher fees? We are never told.
3. On page 259, Wes triumphs the reforms to student maintenance brought in by Gordon Brown in his first few days as Prime Minister, when Wes was an influential student hack: 'we were screaming with joy down the phone to each other. It felt as if we were finally making a real impact on students' lives.' But he says nothing about how he *felt* when it rapidly became apparent that the Brown administration had not done their homework properly, meaning these maintenance changes led directly to a cut in the number of student places, thereby limiting opportunities.[86]
4. Wes reserves a few nice words for Lee Scott, the Conservative MP he defeated at the 2015 General Election. But he tells us nothing

86 **https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/thousands-of-students-worse-off-after-error-leads-to-a-cut-in-university-grants-9lrhrj9b630**

at all about how it *felt* to beat the one and only Conservative MP to lose their job (as a Parliamentary Private Secretary) after signing Wes's NUS pledge against tuition fees and then refusing to vote for the Coalition's £9,000 fees.[87]

5. Wes is open about how much he owes to the NUS, both for giving him so many opportunities and experiences and for providing so many supporters for his political career. But we never find out about how it has *felt* for him to watch the NUS sink into a mire of anti-semitism allegations – a problem that got so bad that, last year, 21 former NUS Presidents, including Wes, warned privately of an 'existential threat' to the organisation.[88]

In short, despite the voluminous details on Wes's childhood, the dots between his early years, his student activism and his chosen profession as an elected public servant are never fully joined up.

Wes's experience as an undergraduate is nevertheless clear evidence of how higher education can change lives. His time at Cambridge, Wes writes, differs from that of most of his contemporaries because, while they escaped the pressure of student life in the holidays, 'for me, Cambridge always felt like the great escape' and an improvement on his holiday job of working in the electrical store Comet.

This is reminiscent of the recent finding in the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* that, compared to other students, 'care-experienced students are significantly more likely to agree strongly that they have a sense of belonging at their institutions.'[89] Even if there is a growing epidemic of loneliness in higher education, for some people enrolling in higher education can feel like coming home.

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87 **https://x.com/nickhillman/status/394607650329341952?s=20**

88 **https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/apr/11/ex-presidents-of-nus-warn-student-body-it-must-address-antisemitism-concerns**

89 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2023.pdf**

The book was not Wes's idea but, if he does ever have a pop at the top political job as so many people expect, it will not do him any harm to have a tome about his disadvantaged London roots on the shelves. And some of the anecdotes are good, even if the best stories, such as how Wes's maternal grandmother shared a prison cell with Christine Keeler or how his beloved paternal grandfather was a firm Tory, are already well known from past interviews.

One tale that particularly sticks with me is how 14-year old Wes decided to represent Labour in his school's mock election in 1997 because of Ann Widdecombe: 'I'd seen the prominent Conservative MP attack single-parent families in the media, and it felt to me like a direct attack on Mum.' If the Conservative Party really does plan to fight the next election on 'woke' issues, how many more effective lifelong enemies might it provoke?

In the end, it is good Wes eschewed the approach taken by those politicians who refuse to write autobiographies on the grounds that it can resemble 'a dog returning to its vomit'.[90] But I still wish his book was shorter and, given the author is of interest because he is a famous politician, included somewhat more politics. If Wes makes it to Number 10, we won't have gained much from knowing that he has a particular penchant for pinching profiteroles.

90 **https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v19/n02/r.w.-johnson/stick-to-the-latin**

What Does Jeremy Think? Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain (2021) by Suzanne Heywood

23 November 2021

During a recent period of COVID-induced isolation, I finally got around to reading *What Does Jeremy Think?*, the lengthy biography of Jeremy Heywood written by his widow, Suzanne. He variously served the Blair, Brown, Cameron and May Governments as Cabinet Secretary, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, Head of the Home Civil Service, Downing Street Chief of Staff and the first Downing Street Permanent Secretary. Whether people know it or not, all our lives have been touched by the multiple decisions that Jeremy Heywood was involved with.

Above all, the book conveys in enormous detail what life is like for the planet-sized brains who make it to the top of the civil service. The most moving sections, however, are on Heywood's family life, including on the challenges, faced by many couples, of conceiving and also on the pressures put upon the spouses of high flyers. The final pages painfully cover Heywood's smoking-induced lung cancer, for which he received the first diagnosis on the morning after the 2017 election.

Frustratingly, despite the huge number of domestic and international issues covered, there is no deep analysis of policy. The book is akin to a diary, with 54 chronological chapters – though without the scurrilous anecdotes that typically enliven political diaries and with the addition of a good dose of hindsight.

I turned to it with just one purpose, however: to remind myself of how Whitehall operates. And, on this, it provides three useful reminders.

1. It emphasises the importance of the crucial relationship at the heart of UK government, that between Number 10 and the Treasury. Time and time again on big issue after big issue, including – for example – in the conversations on New Labour's 2004 tuition fee reforms,

this axis is shown to be more important than anything that gets decided in what are sometimes dismissively known in Whitehall as the OGDs (Other Government Departments).

2. It proves how little time is spent at the centre of Whitehall thinking about any one area of domestic policy, such as higher education in England. There are around half-a-dozen pages that mention higher education in this whole very long book. This is despite the huge reforms that took place in the period covered (such as the introduction of £1,000, then £3,000, then £9,000 fees), which were among the most controversial aspects of the Blair and Coalition Governments. In one sense, this shows the importance of the higher education sector using every opportunity to engage with the centre of government so that, when big decisions are made, they are based on good evidence. In another sense, however, it brings to mind the apt phrase of Giles Wilkes, once a special adviser to Vince Cable, that political disputes tend to be resolved only when they are raised up through the Whitehall machinery until they reach 'a level of greater indifference.'[91]

3. The lengthy sections on the financial crisis during Gordon Brown's Government are a powerful reminder of the unbreakable relationship between the health of the economy and how much money is available for supporting public services, including education. The primary cause of England's high fees / high loans student funding model was not, as is so often claimed, some right-wing desire for 'neoliberal marketisation'; it was the economic backdrop when it was instituted.[92]

Any of the likely changes that could be announced in coming days, such as decreases in the student loan repayment threshold (or, less likely, new student number controls), will have the same driving force

91 **https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/InsideOut%20SPAD%20The%20Unelected%20Lynchpin_0.pdf**

92 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418**

behind them. After all, the deficit in Brown's final year was 10% of GDP; in 2020/21, thanks to the pandemic, it was almost half as much again, at 14.5%.[93] Debt as a percentage of GDP has risen above 100%, way higher than when the Coalition felt the need to allow £9,000 fees.

For all these reasons, the book is worth reading, though there are two caveats. The first is the possibility that a controversial figure may have escaped even-handed analysis. The scandal over supply-chain finance poses questions over Heywood's role, given he brought Lex Greenshill into Number 10 after they were colleagues at Morgan Stanley.[94] Was he too keen on putting such people at the centre of Whitehall? There is no hint of an answer in any of the 500+ pages.

The second risk is that, as with Tony Benn's diaries that are so heavily used by modern historians, an important figure becomes a dominant one. Heywood comes across as being at the centre of pretty much every top-level decision for years and is invariably painted as the smartest and most important person in any room. That may be fair, though the book's subtitle, *Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain*, seems to imply this one official begat everything important about the country in which we live.

Nonetheless, the more engaging chapters do, indirectly, amount to a persuasive argument that the current Number 10 set up could be smoother. As Theresa May told Heywood's widow just after his funeral, 'I think people will look back and notice when he stopped'.

93 **https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicspending/bulletins/ukgovernmentdebtanddeficitforeurostatmaast/march2021#government-deficit**

94 **https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/boardman-review-needs-lead-change-government**

Ticket to Ride: My Adventures in Making Big Money and Giving it Away (2021) by Sir Peter Lampl

31 August 2021

We have all had an education. So there is a strong tendency for our own personal experiences to shape our views. It does not matter how long you have worked in education policy, your personal experiences always matter. In my case, going to boarding school aged eight has left me with a gnawing sense that no child should be sent away so young.

We all let our past histories shape our present views. But Peter Lampl, the founder of the Sutton Trust, does it more than most. While some people interested in policy do not like being told their outlook reflects their own personal journeys, Peter has no such fear. He happily brings his personal experiences – his formative years in the UK and his working life in the US – to bear in his policy thinking.

However, the first two-thirds of Peter's book are not really about those areas for which he is well known among policy wonks, such as setting up the Sutton Trust and campaigning for more social mobility. The early sections are more about management consultancy, the timber and paper industry and wind-surfing – not to mention flogging tickets to an early Beatles concert at a huge mark up (explaining the *Ticket to Ride* title).

It may be the only book on education policy that has chapter headings which include 'Making some money' and 'Making some more money'.

This all makes for a rollicking read (especially as it seems to have been partly ghostwritten by Giles Smith, who I assume is the entertaining journalist of that name, and the author of one of the best books about pop music, *Lost in Music* – read it and you will never look at Nik Kershaw in the same way again).

The one clear reference to education policy in the early part of Lampl's book is an anecdote about how he outperformed his projected A-Level

results, scoring ABB rather than his predicted CCC. This allowed him to stay at school for the old seventh-term Oxbridge entry route, which meant some extra work (think Alan Bennett's *History Boys*) before taking a special entrance exam.

This experience leads Lampl to conclude 'in an ideal world – or even just a slightly smarter one – nobody would apply to university until they had taken their A levels and received their results.' This seems to me a slightly odd lesson to draw, given the seventh-term entry system meant locking your sights firmly on a specific institution *before* you knew how you would do in their all-important entry exam. Is that not the opposite of a post-qualification application?

Either way, the route worked out for Peter, who ended up at Corpus Christi College, thanks particularly to one especially dedicated Chemistry teacher. His time at Oxford – which included getting arrested, doing a cleaning job at Cowley's filthy car works and living next to a future US President – influenced his later outlook.

He notes, for example, that as a student he was 'more likely to meet someone from a state school than a private one.' He claims, 'we were living through a boom time for educational egalitarianism and social fluidity.' Now, he fervently wants us to return there.

Lampl made pots of money through leveraged buyouts, meaning he borrowed money to purchase companies which he then made more successful before selling them on at a huge profit. When after many years of such activity, it all came to seem a little boring, he looked for things to do with his dosh.

At first, after the horrific Dunblane massacre, he (anonymously and heroically) spent money campaigning for gun control in the UK, an experience which he says resembled a buyout in that it he 'put some money in to something and it produced something far greater.' This became the model for the Sutton Trust, named after the company that had conducted those buyouts, through which Peter has since channelled his huge generosity.

It all began after Lampl revisited his old school, Reigate Grammar, and realised he and many of his contemporaries would no longer be able to afford the education on offer, as the school had responded to comprehensivisation by becoming fully private in 1976.[95] A visit to his old Oxford college confirmed his emerging thinking and led to the establishment of summer schools to provide an immersive experience for disadvantaged pupils with high potential, some of whom then went on to become Oxford students themselves.

At this point in the story, it becomes abundantly clear that Peter's vision of social mobility is more a 'fair access' one than a 'widening participation' one; in other words, it is more about getting a greater number of poor kids to the oldest and most famous institutions on either side of the Atlantic than extending higher education provision overall.

Just a few days ago, Peter told *The Daily Telegraph*, 'I think there are too many kids going to university.'[96] In his book, his overarching outlook shines through in the elitist language used, such as 'ultra-smart students', 'top-flight higher education' and 'the best universities' (as well as in the half-hearted paragraph about post-1992 institutions on page 223).

It is not for me to question the use of Sir Peter's own money, which he has undoubtedly put to better use than most extremely rich people. But some readers may nonetheless feel such a big focus on who gets to the so-called 'top' institutions masks an even more important conversation about who gets to go to higher education at all. Six decades ago, the Robbins report said:

> ***We therefore return to our contention that, in the long run, what is needed is not only greater equality of opportunity to enter Oxford and Cambridge but also rather more equality of***

95 Sir Keir Starmer also attended the school and was a pupil when it became private.

96 **https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/08/08/many-teenagers-going-university-warns-education-charity-chief/**

attraction between them and at least some other institutions. We should make the most of first class ability wherever it exists. But, at the undergraduate stage at least, it should not be concentrated in too small a number of centres.[97]

My decade and more in higher education policy has led me to think that superimposing the Ivy League funding model, in which independent institutions with limited numbers of places take from the rich to give to the poor, on UK universities may be inferior to the funding model three of the four parts of the UK already have.

In the current English higher education system, for example, everyone has the right to large taxpayer-backed student loans and means-tested maintenance support – and the amount you repay for your higher education afterwards depends on how well you go on to do financially afterwards rather than how poor your parents were. No one needs to be wholly dependent on the largesse of rich businessfolk or the wealth of their chosen institution for their university place. Moreover, the number of places is not capped and institutions have to answer to a regulator for their access and participation work.

The are strong parallels between what Lampl thinks about higher education and what he thinks about schooling, as shown in the section of the book on opening up Britain's independent schools to a wider clientele. The criticisms of the chasm between state and private education in the UK, which Peter characterises as 'apartheid', may be correct but his solution of broadening the background of pupils at the posher schools via means-tested fees would swap one set of pupils for another. That may be worthwhile, but it cannot on its own deliver a step increase in the total number of people getting a good or outstanding schooling. After all, the objective of ending

97 **https://education-uk.org/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html**

apartheid was not to give a step up to a few disadvantaged South Africans; it was to change South African society.

The main example of Lampl's model of ensuring entry to prestigious private schools 'on merit alone, entirely independent of the ability to pay' was the Sutton's Trust's work at Belvedere Girls' School in Liverpool. Peter's generous sponsorship ensured entry was on merit while fees were means-tested.

In many respects, it was a success, as the individual stories in the book amply show. Yet it was never likely to be picked up by politicians for a national rollout using public money: that would have meant extending academic selection in state-financed schooling, which no recent government – except perhaps Theresa May's – has been committed to.

The Belvedere model is also, arguably, expensive relative to other social mobility interventions, as work conducted for the Sutton Trust by the Boston Consulting Group (who Lampl once worked for) suggests. And, perhaps regrettably, the experiment did not last, as the private sponsorship ran out and was not replaced by alternative money. Belvedere is now a state-funded all-ability academy.

The Belvedere story makes Peter's journey of educational philanthropy feel somewhat circular: he starts with regret that Reigate Grammar School had lost state support and ends with Belvedere joining the state sector. The whole tale serves as a powerful reminder that, when 13 times as many kids attend state schools as private schools, politicians feel they must focus their available time and money on improving state-funded schools more than on playing around with exactly who gets the limited number of places in selective independent schools.

Yet there is no such thing as a wholly new question in education policy and there can be little doubt that the issues Peter has pushed so hard, such as means-tested fees for schools and universities, will continue to be hotly debated. Sir Anthony Seldon, for example, is

among those who have argued that means-tested fees should be applied to state schools as well as private schools and Alex Usher's work for HEPI has shown how means-tested fees could work in UK higher education.[98]

Moreover, if we continue building up a rich body of research on the impact of Peter Lampl's initiatives on individuals and if this shows they have been successful at changing life chances, then his work may come to echo more loudly in the corridors of power as the years go by. Whether or not this happens, his work establishing the Education Endowment Foundation, which only gets relatively brief coverage in the book, will be more important than ever as we seek to recover the ground lost as COVID raged.

While the evidence, and perhaps – returning to my early theme – our different personal journeys, have led me to some rather different conclusions on how someone can have the biggest positive impact in education policy, I still wholeheartedly celebrate Peter's work. No one else has had as big an impact on debates about education and social mobility in today's UK, few people have spent so much helping individuals they do not know to meet their personal potential and Peter is clearly committed to shaking up society, which he complains has set 'like concrete', in a positive way.

The book's sub-title is *My Adventures in Big Money and Giving it Away*. If other rich businesspeople had put as much of their personal wealth towards educational research and campaigning on social mobility as Peter has done, the world would be a very much better place. So thank you Peter.

Now, someone please put him in the Lords.

98 **https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-25798659; https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/09/20/6489/**

The Professor and the Parson: A Story of Desire, Deceit and Defrocking (2019) by Adam Sisman

20 March 2020

If you find yourself with a little more time to read over the next few weeks while social distancing or self-isolating, then may I recommend *The Professor and the Parson*. It is a biography of Robert Peters, who spent much of his life impersonating academics, displaying a keen desperation to don the cloak of a theologian.

I found the story by accident, while succumbing to the dangerously expensive habit of browsing in Daunt's bookshop. There were positive reviews in many national newspapers (including *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Guardian*) and religious outlets (like *The Church Times*) when the book came out last year, but it received less interest in higher education.

That is a pity. For while the author says his goal is 'to entertain, not to instruct', people working in higher education may also find the story instructional.

The very start starts at the very end, with Peters's death certificate. We are told:

> ***The dead man's name was given as Robert Peters. He was described as a retired university lecturer. The certificate gives his date of birth as 11 August 1928, which made him seventy-seven at the time of his death.***

But as Sisman laconically notes, 'None of these details was true.'

Peters's life story is extraordinary. Born as Robert Michael Parkins in 1918, he was ordained as a priest during the Second World War. His

licence to practise was withdrawn two years' later but this did not stop him from spending the next couple of decades working in schools, for the Church of England and as a tutor at the College of Wooster in Ohio, among other posts. During this time, he was deported from Switzerland for failing to pay a hotel bill, arrested for illegal entry to the US and then deported and sentenced to six months in prison back in the UK after issuing a false cheque.

But, in 1957, he finally made it to Magdalen College, Oxford, as a postgraduate student, though only by falsely claiming to have a degree from London. As he applied so late in the process, some of the formalities were unfortunately overlooked. Expelled two years later, he moved on to numerous short-lived positions (and also managed to earn a genuine MA from the University of Manchester).

In the short period from 1982 to 1988, he turned up as:

- a senior lecturer at Uyoi College of Education in Nigeria;
- Rector of the Anglican church of Virginia in the Orange Free State in South Africa;
- Director of Post-Ordination Training for Bloemfontein;
- lecturer at the Federal Theological Seminary in Edendale, Natal;
- rector of Vryheid; and
- lecturer at a small Bible college in Hebron, near Pretoria.

In the late 1980s, he set himself up as the Principal of 'Cambridge Religious Studies Centre', which gained accreditation from the University of Hull, until that was withdrawn, and then by De Montfort, until they too withdrew. He then moved the college to be near Huntingdon and then to Oxford, where it was renamed Monkfield College, and then on to Lincolnshire.

There, he tried to secure accreditation from the University of Sheffield, which sent a senior team to inspect the college in 1999. The visit was a disaster – there were next to no students, as it was claimed teaching

was mainly 'by telephonic communication', and the accounts could not be found. On the journey back, the inspection team had to stop as 'they were laughing so much by what they had seen that they had to pull over into a lay-by.' This did not stop threats of legal action from being made against them afterwards.

Nor did it stop Peters gaining accreditation from the University of Wales, Lampeter, though this too was soon withdrawn. Apparently, Monkfield then began to work with Kensington University, Hawaii, whose alumni included Kim Il-Sung of North Korea.

The story's many weaving paths are sometimes hard to follow because Peters's numerous roles routinely led to his exposure as a fraud and a quick dash to another post, sometimes another country and often into the arms of a different woman.

Counting Peters's romances is as hard as counting the Prime Minister's children. Even the author is uncertain of how many times Peters 'married' – the speech marks denoting inveterate bigamy, for which he was once arrested and charged – but it was clearly close to Zsa Zsa Gabor levels.

Perhaps, in the end, the book is just an amusing piece of history (or, in some areas – such as Peters's attitude to women – an unamusing piece of history). Maybe it could never happen again.

Or perhaps it actually provides a lesson for higher education regulators today. Although he never misses an opportunity to highlight the absurd, the author is clear that the story is not just a piece of historical whimsy. In one footnote, he explains it could all happen again:

> ***On hearing the story of Robert Peters, people invariably comment that 'it couldn't happen nowdays, in the age of the internet'. The evidence suggests otherwise: fraudsters and bigamists seem to be as active today as they have ever been. Indeed such miscreants may benefit from the current cant***

about 'confidentiality' and 'transparency', causing employers to be more reluctant than they were in the past to provide frank testimonials … Peters himself continued his deceptions into the digital era.

Indeed, Peters got away with his schtick for decades, from the 1940s to the 2000s. At one point in the early 1980s, he even managed to get the BBC to let him appear on *Mastermind*, answering questions, not altogether successfully, as a 'Minister of Religion' on the 'Life and Times of Archbishop William Temple'.

Years after Peters died, the Guardian reported that 'there are more than twice as many bogus universities in the UK as genuine ones – higher than anywhere else in Europe.'[99] So perhaps we do need oversight bodies like the QAA and the Office for Students, and sources of information like the Higher Education Degree Datacheck ('the UK's official degree verification hub'), after all?[100]

99 **https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/jul/18/degree-fraud-hedd-checking-service**

100 **https://hedd.ac.uk**

For the Record (2019) by David Cameron

2 October 2019

The overarching story told in the book about higher education funding makes intuitive sense. As David Cameron argues, it is generally (though not universally) accepted that the old state funding system did not allow for a well-funded mass higher education system whereas significantly higher fees can.

But my memory of higher education policymaking inside the Coalition is a little different and a little more complicated than the simple story he recounts.

According to the former Prime Minister's take, he was persuaded by the arguments of people like David Willetts that the system should be bigger, with more students, and so came to accept the case for higher fees.

Although arguments about the optimal size of the higher education system had occurred within the Conservative Opposition prior to 2010, the clear chronology that pits expansion (not austerity) as the prime cause of higher fees is too neat and tidy.

After all, in 2010, when the decision to increase undergraduate tuition fees was made, the Government was being accused by the Labour Opposition of cutting the number of student places they had planned.

And when, a year later, those of us working in the Business Department tried to make the system more responsive to student demand, we had to do it through over-fiddly and now largely forgotten mechanisms specifically designed to hold down growth (though not forgotten by Colin McCaig of Sheffield Hallam University, who often writes about them).[101]

There was the freedom from number controls for students with top grades, which introduced a limited market without injecting new

101 **https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/our-people/staff-profiles/colin-mccaig**

places, and a complicated 'core-and-margin' policy to shift places from some higher education providers to cheaper alternatives.

Both mechanisms were designed to ensure the cake itself could not grow. Within Whitehall, I argued without success for the margin not to be cut from the core. There were fears at the time about the spiralling long-term cost to Government of institutions' tendency to set fees at the maximum £9,000. This made even economically liberal people fearful of interventions that could let the market rip.

I recall sitting in a meeting in Number 10 at which I said a better approach would be to remove student number caps altogether: we do not limit the number of sixth-form places, so why should we limit the number of higher education places, especially as more people wanted to study and institutions wanted to educate them?

My idea was batted away by the very senior civil servant from Number 10 who was chairing the meeting as too eccentric and too far from existing practice to merit proper discussion.

The conversation then returned to how we could continue to relax student number controls within a fixed system. The contrast between the fixing of places in HEFCE-funded institutions and the relative free-for-all among so-called 'alternative providers' encouraged some of the latter to grow, sometimes at the expense of quality and oversight. So restricting growth at traditional providers caused problems for the system as well as for individuals and individual institutions.

Yet the Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, eventually won the argument for removing student number controls from traditional providers for two reasons.

First, as he showed in a publication for the Social Market Foundation launched to mark the 50th anniversary of the Robbins report in 2013, demand for higher education would continue to grow.[102] Demographics and pressure for more equal educational opportunities would combine

102 **https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Publication-Robbins-Revisited-Bigger-and-Better-Higher-Education-David-Willetts.pdf**

to create a huge head of steam that would eventually need releasing. It was a little like the arguments sometimes made for spending more on the NHS when you have an ageing population: the question is not whether to spend more but whether you prepare for the inevitable or let it hit you later on. It is rare that policy can be pinpointed so clearly to a single think-tank publication like *Robbins Revisited* but, as the Director of a think tank, I am pleased to think it does sometimes happen.

Secondly, the Treasury searched hard but could not find any more efficient or straightforward ways to tackle the country's long-term productivity challenge than expanding the number of highly-skilled graduates.[103] Many of us may feel uncomfortable about lobbying for higher education changes on largely financial grounds, when education is about so much more than money. But it is generally by far and away the most persuasive argument when talking to Treasury bean counters. (It even explains the recent announcement on the return of Post-Study Work visas as well as the removal of student number controls.)

It is worth remembering as a result that any future government tempted to reimpose student number controls would be doing so in the face of the same two pressures: demographic changes and sluggish productivity.

Debating the story told by David Cameron's autobiography is not just history or literary criticism. It is also a reminder that there is no intrinsic link between high tuition fees and the absence of student number controls because, for the early years of high fees, there were strict number controls. Or, to put it another way, it is not only promises to abolish tuition fees that could threaten the return of number caps.

Moreover, there is also no intrinsic link between high fees and expansion, given that some students – part-time and mature students – have proven to be more price sensitive then young school leavers. The

103 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03054985.2016.1184870?needAccess=true**

total number of students has not grown since the higher fees were introduced in the way many people seem to think.

To conclude, if you still think the tripling of fees was always and obviously designed to let student number controls be relaxed, then try recalling what a surprise the removal of student number controls was when first announced in December 2013. If the story were as simple as David Cameron's book makes it sound, whereby higher fees were introduced in order to release more places, then no one would have been surprised by the move (and no one from the highly-intensive end of the sector would have shouted at me down the phone about it because they feared the extra costs might come at the expense of the research budget … !).

Of course, there is more than one way to look at any issue and even lengthy political memoirs have to cut corners in the coverage of long periods of time. And, however the story is told, it is true that by removing student number controls the Coalition were able to introduce a new higher education policy that was even more important than their tripling of fees but which was arguably possible only because those fees had been tripled.

D. Statecraft

Failed State: Why nothing works and how to fix it (2024) by Sam Freedman

29 July 2024

A 25-year journey

It is decades since I last read quite so many words by Sam Freedman. But over 25 years ago, I had the privilege of being his GCSE History teacher. In recent years, Sam has made his name as a political commentator and he has now written his first book, *Failed State: Why nothing works and how to fix it*.

Teaching teenage Sam was a tricky job because of his curious mind (and also because I was the youngest teacher at his expensive and prestigious London boys' school). Moreover, Sam's father, Lawrence Freedman, was a War Studies Professor at King's College London and the country's greatest expert on some of the areas I was teaching his son about, making parents' evenings interesting affairs!

In truth, as one former Number 10 apparatchik put it to me, 'I bet Sam didn't need much teaching'. As a voracious reader and lover of history and with a close-knit group of bright friends (one of whom is thanked in the new book as the person who taught him to write), Sam always looked destined for success on his own terms. And he has unequivocally achieved that here.

The book is beautifully written and meticulously researched, displaying Sam's huge capacity for information – even if it is in parts a little black-and-white in its verdicts, as when we are told 'no one is really making policy at all' inside Whitehall. Moreover, Sam has made judicious use of his extensive contacts book for interviews. These provide many juicy original comments (and I would like to pretend this is down to all the time we spent distinguishing primary from secondary sources back in the 1990s …).

When I first knew Sam, it was in the heady early New Labour days when the Conservative Party was in the doldrums and Britpop was in the ascendancy. It was a macho time of *Loaded* magazine and Number 10 spinmasters (invariably men) trampling on open discussion. We know today how badly that all ended, which Sam duly notes towards the end of his book. Yet Sam also argues persuasively that the Blairite Delivery Unit and Strategy Unit were rare successful attempts at getting Number 10, with its ancient architecture completely unsuited to modern government, to operate more effectively. The Brownite Treasury, with its penchant for the off-balance sheet (but ruinously expensive) Private Finance Initiative (PFI) programme, comes out less well.

After Oxford, Sam seemed to have absorbed the traditional right-wing views typical of someone with his educational background. Although I struggled to find any mention of it on his LinkedIn profile, Sam's career began as a lobbyist for elite education: in the words of the *Evening Standard*, Sam 'Made his name as an in-house boffin for the private schools' umbrella group, the Independent Schools Council.' Afterwards, he was employed by the Cameroon think-tank Policy Exchange and, once the Coalition took office, Sam entered Michael Gove's Department for Education as a Policy Adviser. There, he worked on free schools, academies and the like – as well as helping with the Education Act (2011), which was the legislative vehicle that introduced a real rate of interest on student loans and extended the loan system to part-time students.

Sam has been on quite the journey since. His recent Substack pieces include 'The Politics of Envy? A response to every argument against VAT on private school fees', 'What I got wrong about tuition fees' and 'How to change your mind'.[104] In his book, Sam restricts the snippiest barbs to his former colleagues on the right. We are told Steve Hilton is guilty of 'the sort of amorphous and ill-thought-through idea you'd

104 **https://samf.substack.com/p/the-politics-of-envy; https://samf.substack.com/p/what-i-got-wrong-about-tuition-fees; https://samf.substack.com/p/how-to-change-your-mind**

expect from someone who's ended up as a talking head on Fox News.' Suella Braverman 'achieved less than nothing'. Chris Grayling 'is high up on the list of the least competent people to be given high office in British history.'

So Sam is best thought of today as part of that coterie of commentators, including Tim Montgomerie and Dan Hodges, who remain closely associated with one particular part of the political spectrum as a result of their early careers but who are now endlessly critical of that same outlook. It is a sure formula for becoming a high-profile commentator – Montgomerie, Hodges and Sam each have over 150,000 followers on Twitter / X.

The path to success

Sam's book is strongest where it punctures any remaining idea that the relationship between central government and local government is healthy. It tracks the gradual growth in central control, the reduction in local decision-making powers and the increase in competitive bidding for small pots of ringfenced Whitehall money. Sam's core argument, that England has lacked sufficiently powerful entities sitting between the national and the local is not, as he himself readily admits, especially original but it is nonetheless persuasive.

As I read Sam's compelling account of the battle for dominance by Whitehall Departments over town halls, I thought back to the warm words expressed about Sir Bob Kerslake, former Chair of Sheffield Hallam University, at the recent UPP Foundation event held in his memory.[105] The speakers there pointed out how rare Bob was in having served successfully at a top level in both local and national administration, given the different challenges involved and the problems in jumping ship from one to the other. Perhaps the two levels of administration deserve more comparable levels of power, spending and prestige, just as Sam argues?

105 **https://upp-foundation.org/kerslake-collection/**

In my view, Sam's book is weakest, however, when searching for ways to strengthen Parliament's scrutiny over central government. After a hard-hitting and compelling chapter on the growing power of government (the executive) relative to the Houses of Parliament (the legislature), Sam shies away from any major reform to the House of Lords: 'radical reform', we are bluntly told, is 'not needed.' Less tribal and non-elected peers seem to be exactly the sort of people Sam wants to govern us, in preference to those who sully themselves with the electorate's latest priorities.

To my mind, Sam also overemphasises the current influence of Select Committees, claiming without listing any specific evidence that their policy recommendations are often 'adopted by departments' in Whitehall.[106] This apparent exaggeration leads Sam to think 'only a few changes' to the make up of Select Committees would shake things up. Yet an unreformed House of Lords and a pay increase for Select Committee chairs feel like damp squibs after the suckerpunch of the preceding pages on Parliament's failures.

In the book, lawyers – like peers – are given the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their recent battles with elected politicians. And as with fixing the perceived problems between the executive and the legislature, Sam sees the Select Committee system as the solution to resolving heightened tension between the executive and the judiciary. He recommends judges should come under 'select committee oversight'.

Given the make up of the new Parliament, in which one party has around two-thirds of the seats in the House of Commons (on one-third of the votes) and therefore immense sway inside the new Select Committees too, this feels like an insecure safeguard against politicisation of the legal system.

106 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/07/16/what-are-select-committees-and-how-should-the-sector-engage-with-them/**

Autonomy versus micromanagement

While the Office for Students and UKRI receive the odd mention, the links to higher education in Sam's book are infrequent and generally indirect, as outlined below. Indeed, overall it is not a book about UK higher education in any meaningful sense at all: the book is about the state, not independent institutions some of which pre-date the modern state. I have chosen to review it here not because I once taught Sam – I taught two people who went on to be pop stars and have never felt tempted to review their music here – nor because he is a regular commentator on educational issues. I have chosen to review the book because it may inadvertently tell us something rather important about UK higher education institutions.

The story Sam tells is of an overpowerful centre prone to micromanagement, in part because local government has been so weakened. For example, when it comes to schooling, Sam explains how the system was sub-optimal when it was mainly run by local authorities but remained sub-optimal in different ways when academies, overseen by the Department for Education, became dominant. One Whitehall Department cannot have close oversight of so many schools.

In contrast, universities, most of which are legally charities, remained (largely) autonomous while first local government and then central government took over responsibility for schools. In fact, taking the long view, the process was in the opposite direction: those public institutions of higher education that did exist, like local polytechnics, were gradually given their freedoms and became universities while the growing fee / loan system then protected and strengthened their institutional autonomy. The end result was the creation of a world-class higher education system, with international league tables suggesting UK universities beat the less autonomous universities in other European countries hands down.

Yet the level of autonomy that has produced this success is currently under threat on more than one front, including from the Office for

National Statistics's review of whether universities should be classified as part of the public sector, from the growing powers of the Office for Students and from the Labour Party's winning manifesto commitment to do more to integrate further and higher education, not to mention from the refusal of both Conservative and Labour Ministers to raise the fee / loan income directed at both institutions and students.[107] In some ways, higher education risks becoming yet another case study of how the centre of government is tempted to think it can do it all.

So in the end, I struggle to reconcile Sam's repudiation elsewhere of England's student funding model plus his support for 'place planning' (ie student number controls) with the general support in his book for central government butting out of stuff.[108] When it comes to higher education, it is the funding model we have that has the most potential to protect institutional autonomy while also ensuring higher education is ever more open by, for example, allowing the absence of student number caps.

Perhaps this all goes to show how tremendously hard it is to avoid the trap of wanting government action at a micro level while simultaneously repudiating the overweening centralisation of power that has taken place over recent decades.

Nonetheless, overall Keir Starmer could do much worse than read this book as he wrestles with such dilemmas while on his summer hols.

107 **https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf**

108 **https://samf.substack.com/p/what-i-got-wrong-about-tuition-fees**

Follow the Money: How Much Does Britain Cost? (2023) by Paul Johnson

16 April 2024

This is one of the best books I have read. That is really saying something, given it is a book on fiscal policy – or government tax and spend. It is informed, well-written and even amusing, in spite of the topic.

It slays (in the TikTok sense) when it slays (in the traditional sense) common views and historical figures. For example, it attacks the sense that the NHS is sustainable in its current position. It also, notably, attacks the idea that William Beveridge was a visionary when, apparently, he did not get basic Maths right and was really bad at futurology.

The book is rammed full of both killer facts, which are the currency of policymaking, and more quirky points that illustrate the wider madness of how we have come to govern ourselves after years of accretion.

We are told, for example, that the failure to keep things up to date means:

> ***The council tax bills for expensive properties in central London … are still lower in cash terms than the rates bills were at the end of the 1980s.***

Clothing made from goats incurs VAT if the animals come from Mongolia, Yemen or Tibet but not if they come from elsewhere. Gingerbread men with chocolate eyes do not incur VAT but gingerbread men with more chocolate on do.

Intriguingly, Johnson asks whether SERPs (the State Earnings-Related Pension scheme) went wrong due to the fact that a 1970s Labour

Pensions Minister (Brian O'Malley) and his Conservative shadow (Ken Clarke) shared a love of jazz and hammered out the details over cosy drinks at Ronnie Scott's in Soho.

The book makes you think too. For example, Paul Johnson shows the money raised or saved from privatisations and stopping most building of public sector housing as well as cuts elsewhere have funded the propping up of the NHS for years. That rather puts the idea that Thatcher-style Conservatives want to make the NHS so bad that it has to be replaced by another healthcare system, which I seem to read daily on social media, in a new light. In reality, perhaps it was Thatcherism that secured the NHS – just as the NHS was also treated more positively than other areas during the post-2010 austerity, when it was protected against cuts, and also during the pandemic via massive increases in borrowing and spending.

I like to highlight and mark up the most interesting points in books and articles as I go, and I have highlighted a ridiculous proportion of the text in this one (and even though I like to think I knew a little about the issues in advance). The book is so depressingly clear on what is going wrong and how to fix it that it (almost) makes good policy seem easy – just so long as people choose to follow the evidence, consider what works in other countries and challenge shibboleths as well as, most importantly, plan for the long term.

Paul Johnson is also honest, however, about the challenges that democratic politicians face and which he – as a think-tank head – can choose to ignore when designing better policies. And he stays at a relatively high-level, whereas the problems in good policymaking often come in the nitty-gritty details. This is a comprehensive book that covers a lot of ground, but it still has fewer pages than some individual pieces of legislation on relatively small areas that go through Parliament.

But what about higher education? In many respects, the relevance for higher education is in the chapters that focus on other issues. For

example, the chapter on 'poverty and working age welfare' explains how the relative spending power of benefits has fallen behind, which applies to maintenance support for students too.

The later chapters on schooling and post-18 education are thought-provoking as well, not least because Johnson is part of the ever-louder chorus in favour of a broader curriculum for those in Year 12 / Year 13 (sixth form in old money). He also retreads his powerful critique of the available options for those not best suited to the route of traditional higher education.

This book is not perfect, though it is pretty close to it. For me, although it is a small complaint, the commentary is too sympathetic to Adair Turner and his Pensions Commission of 2004. Back then, I was partly responsible for the response of pension companies to the Commission (in my role as a Policy Adviser at the Association of British Insurers). So I watched the whole Commission process closely and even – rather dauntingly – gave oral evidence to it.

In Johnson's view, Adair Turner's Commission deserves most of the credit both for the increase in the State Pension Age and the partial resolution of the so-called 'pensions crisis' via the introduction of auto-enrolment for workers. Both these changes were wise and the second has already proved incredibly successful. But the Commission was far from the only important actor in the campaign to raise the State Pension Age. Moreover, even at the time of the Commission's Final Report, it was regarded by some wise heads as having flunked the question of risk sharing by backing individualised defined contribution schemes more than smarter-designed alternatives. While Johnson flags the benefits of risk sharing as a way of tackling the pension challenges that remain today, he could perhaps have ascribed the very limited success to date of new risk-sharing pension schemes to Adair Turner pulling his punches 20 year ago in exactly the same way as he credits Turner for the successes.

If all this talk of pensions sounds esoteric or detached from HEPI's core interest of higher education, just recall that our sector's current

pension arrangements – such as post-92 universities' membership of the Teachers' Pension Scheme – may not be long for this world.[109] If that is right, we need to consider the full range of alternatives properly.

The book struggles in a really interesting way with the challenge so often faced by policymakers who think both that current systems are not working and need shaking up and that they are not working in part because of endless reorganisations – or 're-disorganisations' as Johnson and others label them. The author does not shy away from proposing big changes: he favours, as so many others before him, a major shake up of social care and urges Ministers to get on with raising the State Pension Age (again). On healthcare more widely, he warns 'Our worship of the NHS is positively damaging.' More specifically, he complains:

> ***The self-declared defenders of the NHS who vociferously complain about 'privatisation' or 'the end of free health care' every time a private sector organisation is involved are, potentially fatally, damaging that which they claim to cherish.***

Rachel Reeves has repeatedly said that she is reading the book; perhaps Wes Streeting is too.

Johnson also favours better major educational changes but tempers these with a good dose of what is possible, which leads him to more conservative solutions in some areas. On qualifications, for example, he writes:

> ***We don't need another set of politicians drunk on the own sense of self-importance throwing it all up in the air and leaving another generation of young people, and another***

109 **https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/infographics/benefits/**

generation of employers, wrestling with yet another new and impenetrable set of qualifications.

The question faced by reforming policymakers is often whether to undergo one last major reorganisation or to live with what exists while making constant small tweaks. That question is today faced by higher education policy wonks too. Some think the biggest challenges faced by universities are best tackled by letting the current fees for home students float up as money changes value over time; others want major structural changes, perhaps preceded by a long review. On student loans, Johnson is perhaps closer to the second camp, writing: 'The idea that the currently favoured system will be in place in its current form for the next forty years is for the birds.'

The Worm in the Apple: A History of the Conservative Party and Europe from Churchill to Cameron (2022) by Christopher Tugendhat

12 April 2022

Back in 2015, when the referendum on UK membership of the EU was approaching, I attended an event on it at the University of Westminster. While there, I heard a former (pro-EU) Tory MP argue that, while high-falutin' arguments were all well and good, there was only one surefire way to stop Brexit: getting other EU countries to say they wanted the UK out. Bloody-minded people keen to annoy Brussels could then have done it by voting for the UK to remain.

Churchill, Macmillan and Heath

This incident came to mind while I was reading the fascinating new book by former Conservative MP, former European Commissioner and former University of Bath Chancellor (1998-2013), Christopher Tugendhat.

The Worm in the Apple: A History of the Conservative Party and Europe from Churchill to Cameron starts by suggesting recent debates on EU membership stem from seeds planted when the Second World War finished.

The author reminds us, for example, that Attlee's Government was sceptical about involvement in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) due to the likely loss of control: 'the deal-breaker was the federal nature of the plan.'

Meanwhile, on the other side of politics, Churchill, Macmillan and Heath urged Labour to participate in the talks on setting up the ECSC, though back in office from 1952, the Conservatives chose not to sign up – providing an early reminder that both major political parties have flipped and flopped in their attitudes towards European cooperation. In the 1950s, one traditional Conservative view was represented by

Lord Salisbury (Chancellor of the University of Liverpool from 1951 to 1971), who wanted 'UK producers first, Commonwealth second and foreigners last'.

Once the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) was signed in 1957, the Conservative Government helped establish the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) with six other countries. But it received lukewarm support from its own MPs. Just half (183 out of 365) of them voted in favour, while Labour abstained.

Two years on, after seeing the relative economic success of the EEC countries, Macmillan came knocking. Tugendhat puts huge weight on the prescience of Lord Kilmuir, the Lord Chancellor (1954-62), who (as David Maxwell Fyfe MP) had helped in the drafting of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Kilmuir wanted policymakers to admit the consequences of EEC membership for UK national sovereignty or else 'those who are opposed to the whole idea of joining the Community will certainly seize on them with more damaging effect later on'.

De Gaulle famously vetoed Macmillan's application because, in the memorable words of one French Minister, UK membership of the EEC would have meant shifting from 'cinq poules et un coq' [five chickens and one rooster] to 'sept ou huit poules. Mais il y aura deux coqs' [seven or eight chickens. But there will be two roosters]. Nonetheless, in 1965 De Gaulle predicted Heath would successfully take the UK into the EEC if he became PM, as eventually happened. But contemporary debate on the consequences was limited: Tugendhat condemns as 'extraordinary' the fact that 'Heath of all men' should be 'so neglectful of what his great project involved for the future governance of Britain'.

Thatcher and Cameron

In a telling aside buried in an endnote, Tugendhat notes Thatcher's dislike of Germany was so strong that, after losing office, she once

pointed at Parliament and said to him, 'Your Germans tried to destroy that, Christopher. Don't ever forget it.' So it is unsurprising that Tugendhat blames Thatcher for Brexit, while simultaneously noting some people who were close to her believe she would have voted Remain had she been alive in 2016. Either way, arguments for European-wide social policies and monetary union, plus the reunification of Germany, pushed Thatcher's Conservative Party away from the European mainstream.

As the book's sub-title suggests, this is a story of high politics. Set-piece speeches take centre stage, including Jacques Delors's speech to the TUC in 1988, which persuaded Thatcher to provide a riposte in her Bruges speech nearly a fortnight later and also helped slowly convert the Labour Party to the European cause. It makes for an interesting tale but, while politicians take centre stage, the people who voted Leave in such large numbers – now the target for the Government's Levelling Up agenda – barely merit a mention.

Tugendhat saves some ammunition for David Cameron, who he notes 'was in favour of [the UK] staying [in the EU], but as a Eurosceptic himself he had failed to construct a compelling case for doing so.' (After reading Cameron's autobiography, which has page-after-page about his frustrations with the EU, I was left wondering how he had ever expected to be a truly persuasive leader for Remain.) But Cameron was not alone in failing to find a path that enabled him to oppose policies emanating from the EU while concurrently supporting continued EU membership.

Universities

As Tugendhat notes, Cameron's failure to outline the 'complexities of leaving' meant Whitehall was all at sea when 51.9% voted to come out of the EU. Yet, failing though this clearly was, even the finest minds in Whitehall would have struggled to predict that, six years on from the referendum, we would still be seeking a resolution to one of

the seemingly simplest and least divisive issues: UK association with Horizon Europe.[110]

There is a walk-on part for the current Chair of the Office for Students, James Wharton.[111] After topping the ballot for Private Members' Bills in 2013, his proposed legislation to enshrine David Cameron's referendum commitment in law won strong backing from Tory MPs. It fell after opposition from their own Coalition colleagues and the House of Lords but was still a precursor to events after the 2015 election. Few would have foretold that, eight years on, English universities would become answerable to Lord Wharton for so much of what they do.

Back in 2016, at the time of the referendum, universities faced in one direction. Vice-chancellors travelled *en masse* to Brussels to support EU membership, set up a Universities for Europe group and spoke out strongly in support of EU membership, while also providing a forum on campus for open debate. It was a notably different stance to the quieter response of Scotland's university leaders to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Only one vice-chancellor I am aware of has said they voted Leave.

Right or wrong, it was impressive to see the majority of university leaders stand up for what they believed in – even as the experienced political journalist and university governor Michael Crick asked them if it was 'bogus', 'unhealthy' or 'un-academic'.

In the end, it seems likely that the vice-chancellors' activities had little impact on the result. But given the direction the country has gone in since 2016, with the leading Brexiteers now in charge, did they perhaps inadvertently make life that little bit harder for the higher education sector when they articulated their genuine concerns so clearly?

110 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/04/07/no-agreement-on-the-horizon-%E2%88%92-a-no-win-situation-for-the-uk-the-eu-and-european-research/**

111 Lord Wharton has since been replaced by Professor Edward Peck.

The Tyranny of Metrics (2019) by Jerry Z. Muller

9 February 2022

Perhaps it is because the Office for Students have just published 640 pages on higher education metrics or perhaps it is because we will soon see the long-awaited Research Excellence Framework (REF) results, but I have found myself thinking a lot about metrics in the past few weeks.

In a recent blog post, I mentioned the persuasive book *Super Crunchers* (2007) by the economist Ian Ayres.[112] It provides a clear case for learning new lessons from big data. If anything, the past couple of years strengthen the case, as we have only been able to understand the spread and impact of COVID-19 by collecting huge amounts of data.

Yet in the last few days I have been reading a more recent and equally persuasive book, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (originally published in 2018, but I read the revised version published in 2019) by the historian Jerry Z. Muller. This puts forward the opposite case. It argues – a tad inelegantly – that 'the best use of metrics may be not to use it at all.'

While *Super Crunchers* mentions how numbers were used in baseball to find out more about players' performances than expertise could ever show, Muller says this made the game 'more regular' and therefore 'more boring to watch, resulting in diminished audiences.'

The Tyranny of Metrics is full of examples of data being (over)used as an accountability tool in US and UK education (as well as in other public services). The author says this encourages people to game, distort and cheat as well as to focus too much on a small handful of specific issues rather than a broader range of priorities.

Muller is a historian and some of the history he squeezes in is fascinating, including the tale of how payment by results for public

112 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/01/21/what-do-wine-tasting-super-crunchers-and-king-canute-have-to-teach-us-about-the-newest-regulatory-burdens-on-universities/**

services began. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Liberal MP Robert Lowe linked schools' funding to the performance of pupils in English and Maths.

Muller recounts how, immediately, Matthew Arnold warned Lowe's policy would narrow education down to the things that were measured and have a disproportionate impact on poorer families. (Those who complain today about Progress 8, B3 or LEO make similar criticisms.)

Among the numerous complaints that Muller makes of how statistics are used is one that perhaps rings especially true in public policy. He notes:

> ***the degree of numerical precision promised by metrics may be far greater than is required by actual practitioners, and attaining that precision requires an expenditure of time and effort that may not be worthwhile.***

Later on, he warns: 'the more you measure, the greater the likelihood that the marginal costs of measuring will exceed the benefits.'

It all reminds me of a memorable piece last year in *The Sunday Times* by James Timpson from the shoe repair and key-cutting firm Timpson's.[113] Although his company's turnover is similar to that of a smaller university, he wrote about the benefits of stripping data collection back to basics:

> ***There must be a point where the costs of interpreting and using data exceed the benefits of collecting it. Can you afford a chief data officer paid £120,000 a year plus bonus? We can't, so instead we have three simple ways of understanding what's going on.***

113 **https://www.thetimes.com/business/companies-markets/article/the-best-morning-routine-check-your-bank-balance-zfvmth5bd**

> ***Every night at 7pm, I get an email listing that day's sales. … our second barometer is customer service scores, which I look at every day. … One piece of data beats everything else. A quarter of a century ago, my dad taught me the best way to measure the health of our business was to look at the cash figure every day. … This fact offers no hiding place.***

Timpson also warned it is a feature of failing businesses to seek out ever more data, much of which turns out never to be used, while losing sight of what matters.

> ***The [failing] businesses we bought were often collecting vast amounts of data from their fancy tills, yet the managers were actually reading very little of it, and it rarely helped colleagues give better customer service. As sales plummeted, they analysed more data, and brought in more finance experts and consultants to work out where the problems were. Redundancies weren't made from the data team — it was the people on the front line, serving customers, who lost their jobs first. These companies failed because they lost focus on what's important: great customer service.***

I was reminded of this when reading *The Tyranny of Metrics* because Muller notes how the demand for ever more data has grown unceasingly in education. He ascribes this to the fact that, there is no 'in-built restraint' against it. In contrast, in the business world excessive collection of redundant data is eventually seen to eat into profits.

Anyone reading the new documentation from the Office for Students might wonder if Muller has a point.

Why does higher education have a problem with data?

Aside from the demands of managers and regulators, there is surely another – generally overlooked – cause of excessive data production in our sector: the bottom-up demand for ever more data.

Instead of asking whether 640 pages is too much, people in the higher education sector are often tempted to look for clever-clever ways to show how any data that is collected is not granular or sophisticated enough. As a result, we end up implying 640 pages are not enough.

I think this problem stems from the positive fact that educators are used to critical questioning and searching out flaws, as a way of lighting up more intricate paths. But a problem arises when those alternative paths are too complicated for day-to-day use.

It can often feel like we are in a never-ending cycle where data is produced, then criticised, then refined or replaced with something even more complicated which then risks being not fit for purpose.

If this sounds overblown, consider the sorry story of the useful HESA benchmarks. These contextualise important information about each institution's performances and have proved useful over many years. The HESA website tells the full tale, which in an abridged form is as follows:

> ***The UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs) are official statistics which help users compare the performance of universities and colleges against benchmarks. Current UKPIs include measures for widening participation in HE, and for student non-continuation. In the past, the UKPIs have covered other aspects of HE sector performance, such as measures associated with research and graduate destinations. … Performance Indicators were first developed and published for the 1996/97 academic year. … However, higher education in the UK has seen significant changes over the time period***

> ***covered by the UKPIs. … Although development work on new indicators was undertaken, there were significant difficulties in reaching consensus on UK-wide definitions and deployment. This resulted in proposed new indicators never achieving approval for launch. … We have reached the following conclusions: No clear consensus has emerged on a new strategic vision for the UKPIs. There is a clear desire to see the lack of coherence between the UKPIs and formal policy and regulatory metrics resolved. … In view of these conclusions we have decided that the UKPIs require fundamental reform. … As a result of this process of reform, we are announcing that the next edition of the UKPIs in 2022 will be the last in its current form.***[114]

Perhaps we would be better off accepting data will always be imperfect. Rather than demanding contextual factors are reflected in ever more complex data, we could ensure they are reflected in the accompanying contextual information instead. We could then ensure that the contextual information carries at least as much weight as the numbers.

This is, in effect, what the Office for Students is proposing in their current consultation on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF):

> ***We propose that in carrying out their assessments, panel members should interpret and weigh up the evidence by applying their expert judgement, guided by a set of principles and guidelines. We do not propose that they should deploy an initial hypothesis (a formulaic approach used in the previous TEF based solely on the indicators) or other formulaic judgement solely based on the indicators.***[115]

114 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/blog/19-05-2021/measure-measures**

115 **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/6721/consultation-on-the-tef.pdf**

The world is getting better

To return to where I started, the one shared problem uniting Jerry Muller's data-scepticism in *The Tyranny of Metrics* with Ian Ayres's dataphilia outlined in *Super Crunchers* is that they assume the worst.

In fact, it is possible to take on board the warnings about the dangers of overusing or underusing data to deliver something better, balancing the quantitative and the qualitative. (We have sought to do this in HEPI's own work – such as our recent piece with Kaplan International Pathways on international students' attitudes towards careers support, which rests upon quantitative polling and qualitative research.[116])

Beyond the new TEF proposals mentioned above, there are three positive signs that this balancing is now happening:

i. First, if you read it carefully, you will see the Office for Students' *Consultation on a new approach to regulating student outcomes* maintains a big role for contextual factors:

   c. The OfS [Office for Students] will consider whether it is satisfied that it has sufficient statistical evidence that an indicator or split indicator for the provider is below a relevant numerical threshold.

   d. If so, the OfS will consider whether it has evidence that the provider's context means that performance below a numerical threshold nevertheless represents positive outcomes.

   e. If the OfS is not satisfied that it holds such information, it will seek further information about contextual factors from the provider.

   f. If, as a result of the steps above, the OfS is not satisfied that context means the provider's performance represents positive outcomes, it will make a provisional decision that initial condition

116 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/10/14/international-students-need-more-relevant-careers-support-if-uk-is-to-remain-a-destination-of-choice/**

B3 is not satisfied. The OfS will then consider representations from the provider before reaching a final decision.[117]

ii. Secondly, in a thoughtful speech delivered at a HEPI / Elsevier conference in October 2020, the then Minister for Science, Amanda Solloway MP, noted the gradual improvements to research evaluation that had been made but also queried how metrics are used in the Research Excellence Framework, and announced a review of the process for evaluating research.

> ***It is clear to me that many of you feel pressure from the wider evaluation system – pressure to demonstrate particular things to your peers and your superiors – things which sometimes make very little sense. … This gives rise to related issues – we know people feel pressured to show significant results from their work, to get it published, just to justify the effort and investment involved. This could be having a profound effect on the very integrity of science itself – leading to questionable research practices and evidence of a growing crisis in the reproducibility of research. … We have created this situation, in part because of the way we evaluate success. These are not new problems, but the good news is that the UK is leading the way in tackling them. … The REF exercise of today would be hardly recognisable to those involved in the early selectivity exercises of the 1980s. Although intended for simple purposes, universities have turned the REF into a major industry, with rising costs and complexity. … There are***

117 **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/c46cb18a-7826-4ed9-9739-1e785e24519a/consultation-on-a-new-approach-to-regulating-student-outcomes-ofs-2022-01.pdf**. The use of contextual information was emphasised further in the outcome of the consultation: 'For the avoidance of doubt, we are committed to seeking contextual information in all circumstances where we select a provider for assessment.' **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/20226350-1141-4956-acf3-064c859aa69d/regulating-student-outcomes-analysis-of-responses.pdf**

> ***now very few parts of academic life in the UK that are not affected in some way by the REF. … Indeed, we know that 4 in 10 surveyed researchers believe that their workplace puts more value on metrics than on research quality. … we must be prepared to look to the future and ask ourselves how the REF can be evolved for the better, so that universities and funders work together to help build the research culture we all aspire to. … So I have today written to Research England to ask them to start working with their counterparts in the devolved administrations on a plan for reforming the REF after the current exercise is complete.***[118]

iii. Thirdly, Universities UK's long-awaited paper on assessing quality is more interesting than its dull title, *Framework for programme reviews*, suggests for it seeks to take a panoramic view rather than a small snapshot.

It is worth looking at the short paper in its entirety but this one sentence stood out for me:

> ***The use of metrics in the framework is principled, flexible where appropriate, and sensitive to both the limits of quantitative approaches and the importance of wider contextual information.***[119]

So away from all the hackneyed and clichéd whinges about the 'neo-liberal marketisation' of higher education, an optimist might say we are actually in the midst of an important shift in higher education policy.

118 **https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/science-minister-on-the-research-landscape**

119 **https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2022-01/uuk-framework-for-programme-reviews.pdf**

Current initiatives typically reject both the old ways that (largely) ignored data but also the one-dimensional performance indicators common since the days of John Major and Tony Blair in the UK and Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in the US.

And that is surely something to celebrate in these dark times.

E. Extremism and free speech

Paper Belt on Fire by Michael Gibson (2023) and *Voice, Values and Virtue: The New British Politics* (2023) by Matthew Goodwin

28 April 2023

I was recently fortunate enough to spend a week holidaying in Paris. In the precious moments I could snatch away from queueing at Disneyland, this gave me the chance to read two new books relevant to the debate about universities' position in our national life, including their relationship to 'wokeness'.

The first of the two is *Paper Belt on Fire* by Michael Gibson. He helped set up and run the Peter Thiel scholarships for young people. These are reserved for those who either have not been to university or who have dropped out of higher education.

The book is a bit of a mess as it is not certain if it is a personal memoir, an anti-university polemic or a hymn of praise to Peter Thiel, meaning it flips and flops all over the place. But one fact shines through: the so-called 'anti-Rhodes scholarships' over which Gibson presided are designed to highlight the uselessness of traditional higher education by funding a tiny handful (20) of extraordinary people without university degrees to succeed.

I am not sure anyone has ever argued that going to a traditional university is the only way for the truly exceptional to leave their mark on the world. But Gibson's book includes, I think, an important insight. It highlights the gap between the growing diversity we have seen in higher education institutions and the apparent narrowing of views among those who pass through them, asking: 'Why are there some 5,300 universities and colleges in the United States but only one point of view?'

The second book I read is the controversial new one by the Kent University Professor, Matthew Goodwin, *Values, Voice and Virtue: The*

New British Politics.[120] It has hit a raw nerve in the UK in the four weeks since it was published and it is even more relevant to the theme of wokeness. Goodwin's book has been widely excoriated, including by many of those I follow on Twitter, though few seem to have actually read it. I suspect the opprobrium may only serve to pump up sales.

Goodwin says there is a 'new elite' in charge who are less responsive to, or even actively dislike, the millions of adult Britons who want more say over their own lives and who voted for populism, Brexit and Boris Johnson:

> ***the new elite have taken full control of the political institutions, the think tanks, the civil service, the public bodies, the universities, the creative industries, the cultural institutions and much of the media.***

Of the differences between the two groups, the new elite and those of a more traditionalist bent, Goodwin says the level of education 'has been the most striking.' He lays the blame squarely at the gates of universities:

> ***Britain's universities, like many other institutions in society, are now morphing into 'ideological monocultures', when liberal cosmopolitan and progressive values are completely dominant, those who do not share them feel they cannot speak, and political minorities, such as conservatives and gender-critical scholars, are either marginalised or openly discriminated against.***

I enjoyed reading the argument. The book is much better written and much more thought-provoking than Goodwin's critics would have you believe. However, although my local Waterstone's has opted to file it

120 Matthew Goodwin is no longer employed by Kent University.

under British History, to me the book suffers from its limited historical perspective.

Goodwin dates the birth of the gap between the new elite and the working class to May 1979, when Thatcher came to power and started to break down old shibboleths. But even if the overall argument is correct, surely there were some important antecedents, such as when meat porters and dockers marched around Westminster in support of Enoch Powell's opposition to large-scale immigration?[121]

We are never told where such episodes fit in to the story. Given that Powell was also an early Brexiteer and influenced Nigel Farage, who does get space in the book, it seems just a bit too neat and tidy to portray the period before Thatcher as one coherent time with patrician leaders satisfying the demands of the working class and the subsequent period as something altogether different with out-of-touch liberals moving ever further away from the mass of voters.

Nonetheless, Goodwin's book reminds me of the persuasive blog we ran at HEPI six years ago titled 'Why do academics keep getting election predictions wrong?' which argued it was the insularity of political studies academics that explained why they were unable to predict how voters would behave in the 2015 General Election, the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US Presidential election.[122] Have the reasons they got it so wrong been addressed?

So while Gibson complains US universities have failed to find a way to house those with the libertarian small-state views common in Silicon Valley, Goodwin say UK universities are out of touch with mainstream society and have failed to make room for those holding the traditionalist views of the British working-class on issues like family, community and nationhood.

121 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00313220701805927**

122 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/05/15/academics-keep-getting-election-predictions-wrong/**

Both authors have the more prestigious universities in their sights, which is a touch ironic given they learned how to craft an argument in traditional higher education. But such views find some support in HEPI's own recent polling with the UPP Foundation, which shows most people have not visited a university in the last five years and in many instances ever.[123] Over half of those from socio-economic groups D and E say they have never visited a university.

Yet those of us working in higher education like to think of universities as institutions that sit at the heart of their communities and serve them, while pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge to the benefit of all. While we may like to think of universities as bodies that help knit society together, the critics of twenty-first century higher education tend to regard them as bodies that have deepened society's divisions.

You may think these arguments are overblown. Many people do. But our own polling at HEPI does show a clear trend of increasing illiberalism among students that is somewhat out of kilter with life outside. In 2016, we found ambivalence and confusion among students across a range of free speech issues.[124] More recently, we found:

- eight-out-of-10 students (79%) believe 'Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected';
- almost two-thirds of students (62%) want tabloid newspapers banned from student union shops; and
- over one-third (36%) of students believe academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' (up from 15% in 2016).[125]

123 **https://upp-foundation.org/upp-foundation-and-hepi-public-attitudes-to-higher-education-2022/**

124 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/05/22/3341/**

125 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/06/23/you-cant-say-that-new-polling-shows-students-want-more-controls-on-free-expression/**

A growing proportion of people – and not always the usual suspects – seem to think something needs to change. For example, at the Report Stage of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, Lord Collins, the Labour spokesman in the Lords and a former trade union leader, said:

> ***My Lords, I have a confession to make: when I spoke at Second Reading, I expressed the opinion that this Bill was not necessary. However, during the process of Committee and the dialogue and discussions that I have had with many noble Lords – by the way, I have no interest as a university leader to declare – I was persuaded that there is an issue to address.***[126]

So I would argue we must do more to engage with the common criticisms. Most obviously and urgently perhaps, we should stop giving hostages to fortune that make it so easy for people to kick the higher education sector.

- Of course, if students ban the Christian union from a freshers' fayre, they will be attacked.
- Of course, if you add trigger warnings to classics of English literature, there will be a backlash.
- Of course, if a student society disinvites a former Home Secretary or a prominent member of the House of Lords after inviting them to deliver a speech, negative press coverage will follow.

It is no good just blaming the media when these sorts of stories appear: they are too juicy not to be reported.

Secondly, we need to teach students how to 'disagree well' by getting them to think through important questions such as:

126 **https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2022-12-07/debates/209A6F51-E8E5-41FB-8A3C-963D6C1A1041/HigherEducation(FreedomOfSpeech)Bil**

- ‘What is university for?’
- ‘How do I listen to – and learn from – others?’
- ‘What does reasonable protest look like?’

I have suggested before that this should begin in freshers’ week and continue afterwards.

I have mentioned two books already but a third recent book, *Freedom of Speech in Universities* by Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect, which focuses on the concept of a Community of Inquiry may be helpful here.

Thirdly, we should think about whether there are other organisations that can help. One 2021 HEPI paper by Richard Brabner, for example, recommends a UK version of the US Heterodox Academy, which works with universities to support viewpoint diversity and pluralism.[127] The new Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in the Office for Students is also clearly going to be important in fostering the right conditions here and serving as a referee when things get out of hand.

127 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-One-Nation-University-Spreading-opportunity-reducing-division-and-building-community.pdf**

Freedom of Speech in Universities: Islam, Charities and Counter-terrorism (2021) by Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect

20 March 2023

During a recent chat on free speech in UK higher education, someone with years of experience in a senior role regulating universities told me to read *Freedom of Speech in Universities: Islam, Charities and Counter-terrorism* by Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect.

So I have. It is a short book in the Routledge Focus series and, having now read it, I agree it deserves a wider readership – at the time of writing this piece, it had no reviews at all on Amazon despite being two years old (though it did have one five-star rating).

Smell the CofI

The book separates possible responses to the issue of free speech on campus in four:

1. Libertarian
2. Liberal
3. Guarded liberal
4. No-platforming

The authors back the 'liberal' approach, with the goal of ensuring universities develop a Community of Inquiry or CofI: 'the CofI approach reminds us to find a human bond with others even when we think their ideas are stupid.'

They explain this in more detail by saying:

> ***we are convinced by the strong case that societies gain more from open and critical debate about marginal, challenging or offensive views than from their exclusion – whether on***

the grounds that this is essential for establishing truth, for participating in democracy, or because the consequences of exclusion are worse.

In short, the goal is risk awareness rather than risk aversion. This is a useful framework, as the overarching objective becomes facilitating events rather than blocking anything that feels risky. It also means giving thought to the potential consequences of events before they happen rather than in a crisis at the time.

The approach cannot offer a panacea, however. Excessive focus on risk awareness may not address the chilling effect of bureaucracy on event organisers.[128] Moreover, risk is an average and specific incidences of risk can be exaggerated: you may know events on the Middle East or the rights of trans people can raise tensions, but you do not always know which event will be the one that flares up.

Despite rightly seeing more debate as a way to pick a way through difficult terrain and recognising the central role universities have to play, the book also reflects the divisions that make this policy area so fraught and which tend to pit those in power against others.

Most notably, the authors regard the threats to free speech on campus as coming almost wholly from the right, with lots of discussion about 'right-wing populism'. We are told, for example, that 'for right-wing populists in particular, rhetorical appeals to freedom of speech go hand in hand with attacks on minority groups'.

If readers doubt the target is the right rather than all those who oppose liberty on both ends of the political spectrum, they should take a look at the book's Index: under 'p', there is one reference to 'left-wing' populism but multiple references to 'right-wing' populism. The entry for 'right-wing' merely states '*see* populism', implying the terms are synonymous.

128 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/10/13/new-study-finds-quiet-no-platforming-to-be-a-bigger-problem-than-actual-no-platforming/**

There are two problems with this approach. First, from reading the book you would never know that Corbyn-mania, which was a form of left-wing populism that facilitated attacks on one minority group in particular – Jewish people – was concentrated among the middle-class young people who make up the mass of full-time undergraduates.

It is now widely accepted even by his own former party that the form of left-wing populism over which Corbyn presided allowed antisemitism to fester. Two-thirds of students and one-half of staff backed Labour when Corbyn was leader, but he does not get a single mention in the book.[129] Antisemitism gets two.

The authors focus instead on the Henry Jackson Society (HJS), which is sometimes described as 'neoconservative' and wants to limit some extremist speech, and *Spiked*, which tends to be defined as 'right-libertarian' and supports more of a free-for-all, before repeatedly criticising 'Right-wing populists [who] sneak into the gap between these [two] claims' (see pages 32, 82 and 119).

So the right are portrayed as wrong if they want to limit more extremist speech, wrong if they push for a looser libertarian approach and wrong if they take a position in the space between these two positions. If you are on the right and you have a view about free speech, it is deemed to be incorrect on sight, which seems unconducive to a reasonable conversation.

At this point, the careful architecture of the authors' argument starts to crumble, not least because left-wing populists and others (such as the NUS) are in exactly the same 'gap', which is really a chasm.

129 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/12/18/two-thirds-68-students-now-back-labour-think-labour-55-jeremy-corbyn-58-back-remain/; https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/general-election-2017-54-per-cent-backing-for-labour-in-poll**

If you support no platforming while opposing Prevent, you are somewhere between wanting a clampdown and a free-for-all just as you are if you oppose no platforming while supporting Prevent. The authors of the book themselves live in this gap too: they want vibrant, fair and open debate within some limits – 'Liberal' not 'Libertarian'.

Students have typically resided in the same space, backing free speech in theory but offering less robust support when grilled further.[130] In other words, those who want much stricter limits on free speech and those who want a libertarian approach stand out because their positions are untypical, not because most people agree with one or the other.

Smash Capitalism!

The second limitation with the authors' approach is that, for well over a decade, we have had right-of-centre governments at Westminster. So condemning populism while associating it only with the side of the political spectrum that happens to be in power and ignoring the populist left makes the book appear resolutely anti-government.

That is the prerogative of the authors who are exercising their own freedom of speech. But their stated intention is to influence policy and the lack of balance makes that less likely. Whoever is in office will tend to be sucked in to any culture war that exists, yet this book's partiality means the lessons are less likely to be digested by those currently in power.

If this sounds overcooked, the section in the book on student unions gives the game away. It recognises there are benefits from the recent tighter regulation of student unions (for example, on governance and financial management). It also marshals evidence to show the Charity Commission may have sometimes overstretched themselves when regulating student union events.

130 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Hepi_Keeping-Schtum-Report-85-Web.pdf**

But the authors condemn the common idea that student unions should avoid political campaigning that is not focused on students. They envisage students backing a motion that devotes resources to protesting about a national economic policy and argue 'we think their students' union should have at least the possibility of enacting the motion if they so wish.'

This sounds more like finding an excuse to divert charitable funds from their proper use than protecting free speech. If a group of students want to campaign against a national economic policy, there are plenty of existing and legitimate routes for them to do so (including joining a political party) aside from (mis)using their fellow students' charitable financial resources.

So the book is a useful addition to the canon on free speech in UK universities. Given the expertise of the authors, it may be of particular value to Prevent Leads in higher education institutions. But it needs to be read alongside other material that conveys a greater sense of the full range of attacks on free and fair debate on campus.

Jews Don't Count (2021) by David Baddiel

15 May 2022

For those of us who first entered higher education in the 1990s, David Baddiel will always be one half of Newman and Baddiel, the first comedians to sell out Wembley Arena and the men behind the wonderful History Today sketches, which punctured those obscure academic debates that are pumped up way beyond their true value. Later, we watched him as one-half of the *Fantasy Football* League duo with Frank Skinner and listened to him sing 'Three Lions'. Today, we buy his children's books for our kids.

Baddiel's newest non-children's book, published in paperback in February 2022, is much less funny than all of these – and designedly so. It argues 'progressives' often leave Jewish people out in considerations of racism. For example, it ends by discussing a Tweet from the actor Robert Lindsay that said Jeremy Corbyn 'certainly isn't racist'. Referring to Lindsay's most famous character, Baddiel closes with the words: 'on realising that for Wolfie Smith, Jews didn't count, a tiny part of me died.'

Antisemitism today

Baddiel, whose self-description on Twitter is just the one word 'Jew', makes too many good points to summarise in a short review – even though his piece is more like an extended essay than a full-length book (and, appropriately, published by the *Times Literary Supplement*). One claim that particularly struck me was his contention that 'racists say Jews aren't white' while others think they are 'and, therefore, not really deserving of the protections progressive movements offer to non-white people facing racism.' From this, Baddiel argues, many problems stem.

He also highlights the challenges faced by those seeking to draw attention to antisemitism. He compares the way Corbynistas

responded to claims of antisemitism with the far right's response to #BlackLivesMatter: 'the reflex need always to follow the phrase antisemitism with "and all types of racism" is the left's All Lives Matter.'

This book is aimed at self-proclaimed progressives more than others, as Baddiel focuses on the gap between what progressive politics claims to stand for and how it sometimes treats Jewish people. The most striking section reads:

> ***I think what was never understood by those in the Labour Party who became defensive around the issue of antisemitism between 2015 and 2019 is how scared, at base, Jews are. Jews, particularly those of my generation, were brought up under the shadow of the Holocaust. My mother was born in Nazi Germany. I only exist by the skin of my teeth.***

To address the issues that he raises, Baddiel argues that BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) – despite its flaws as a category, which mean it has lost favour – should be understood to include Jewish people. He also argues that microaggressions affecting Jewish people should in future be treated in the same way as those aimed at other minorities: 'It is my position that racism should not be a competition: that all racisms should be regarded as equally bad.'

To those who respond to such claims by implying or even stating explicitly that Jews are different from other minorities because they supposedly have money, Baddiel simply says 'fuck off', before pointing out: a) as a general rule, it is not true; and b) if it were true, money does not protect you against racism, as illustrated by what happened to Baddiel's own relatives in 1930s Germany.

Censorship

The problem with censoring mainstream media is you need to apply the rules fairly, and Baddiel shows persuasively that – often – this

simply is not done. He does not ask for things to be cancelled: 'I'm not interested, for the purposes of this book, in the overall rights and wrongs of cancel culture'. He simply calls out many instances of unequal treatment, leaving the impression that either more stuff should be cancelled or less stuff should be cancelled but – whichever it is – the rules should be applied more equitably.

He is surely right about inconsistent policing. One example that strikes me (not mentioned by Baddiel) is that, while the BBC has infamously removed parts of the 'Don't Mention the War' episode of *Fawlty Towers* and accompanies what is left with a warning (and briefly removed the whole episode from its UKTV platform), Diana Mosley's *Desert Islands Discs* remains on BBC Sounds with no clear negative warning about the content, which is merely described as 'contentious'.

Yet while fantasising about life on a desert isle (and just before Wagner was played), Lady Mosley denied the scale of the Holocaust, telling Sue Lawley, 'I don't really, I'm afraid, believe that six million people [died]. I think it's just not conceivable'. What rational policing policy could excuse greater leniency for this interview than for a fictional sitcom?

It is not a perfect book. Some will find Baddiel's reliance on Twitter as his main source frustrating, although he rightly explains this is where many of the battles over identity politics occur. The text is unpolished in places, and the numerous chatty asides in the footnotes leave the impression that the author could not be bothered to weave some of his thoughts into the main text. The few really important footnotes, such as the one in which Baddiel apologises for the book being less relevant to Jews of colour, risk getting lost as a result. In the end, however, if the sign of a good book is that it makes you think, then this is a very very good book.

Higher education and antisemitism

Baddiel's timely arguments are perhaps especially worth reading by those of us working in UK higher education because our sector, most

notably the student movement, has been accused by many of having issues it needs to address. Looking just at the National Union of Students (NUS) in the past few weeks for example:

- 21 past NUS Presidents, including the former Labour Cabinet Ministers Jack Straw, Charles Clarke and Jim Murphy as well as Wes Streeting and Shakira Martin (who I regard as the last effective NUS President), have 'sent an unprecedented private warning to the organisation's trustees, urging them to address concerns from Jewish students';[131]
- Robert Halfon, the Chair of the Education Select Committee, has referred the NUS to the Charity Commission for 'fostering a "culture of discrimination"';[132] and
- Michelle Donelan, Westminster's Minister for Higher and Further Education, tweeted last Friday: 'Enough is enough. I've prepared a package of sanctions against @nusuk following concerning incidents over many years. Disappointed it has come to this but proud to stand up for Jewish students.'[133]

Universities are microcosms of society and anyone wanting to tackle the increase in antisemitic attacks – according to the Community Security Trust, 2021 saw the most antisemitic campus-related incidents in any calendar year[134] – will find helpful material in *Jews Don't Count* on how to confront the underlying causes.

The minority of universities that have yet to fulfil the request of the Government, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Union of Jewish Students to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance

131 **https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/apr/11/ex-presidents-of-nus-warn-student-body-it-must-address-antisemitism-concerns**

132 **https://www.thejc.com/news/politics/mp-halfon-refers-nus-to-the-charity-commission-mjx9k4a0**

133 **https://x.com/michelledonelan/status/1525182947757785090?s=21&t=NO9HEKX6CQXfHDIZbtJk4w**

134 **https://cst.org.uk/data/file/f/f/Incidents%20Report%202021.1644318940.pdf**

Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism may want to doublecheck the reasons for their stance. Are they absolutely certain they are not falling into the traps Baddiel identifies? To many inside and outside our sector, failing to adopt that definition could seem a strange hill to defend.

Back in the 1990s where I began this review, I once argued as an undergraduate that it was not necessary for our students' union to adopt a motion opposing Holocaust denial because – even though, as a History student, I knew all such denials are ridiculous – the issue did not seem to link closely to the contemporary student experience. I was wrong. Completely wrong in fact.

Educational institutions and their students' unions have a duty to protect their members. Action was needed back then to make sure their Jewish members were safe – just as, sadly, continues to be the case today.

Free Speech And Why it Matters (2021) by Andrew Doyle

21 February 2022

Andrew Doyle has studied at three British universities but he became famous under the pseudonym Titania McGrath, who sends out a stream of witty or unfunny Tweets, depending on your point of view and – possibly – your political persuasion. These lampoon the 'identity politics' that are considered by many people to have infected society, particularly the Labour Party and universities. One popular example of a Titania McGrath Tweet is: 'If all opinions that I disagree with were made illegal, fascism would be over.'[135]

Doyle's latest incarnation is as a talkshow host on GBNews, where I suspect he is the only presenter with a PhD from Oxford in early Renaissance poetry.

His short book *Free Speech And Why it Matters* (2021) is an easy read, coming in at under 100 pages (excluding endnotes), but there is plenty of room for some powerful points:

- Doyle notes the overlap between societies that restrict free speech and societies that limit the rights of minorities;
- he rightly makes the case that free speech is an historical oddity, in that it has been denied to most humans who have ever lived, which may help explain why it needs to be treasured and protected; and
- he attacks the fashion for describing some words as acts of 'violence', drawing a contrast between 'barbed words' and 'barbed wire'.

Above all, his thin volume seeks to show free speech is 'the seedbed of all our freedoms.' The conclusion claims: 'Without it, there can be no education, no means to defend ourselves when maligned or

135 **https://x.com/TitaniaMcGrath/status/1420495836681752579?s=20&t=cRo11qFkxBMXdPHQXAYKig**

misrepresented, no exchange of ideas, no artistic expression, and no safeguard against indoctrination.'

A fleeting acquaintance with Doyle's work might leave the impression that he supports free speech in its purest guise to the hilt. In fact, a careful reading of this book shows this to be false. As with most of us, his support for free speech comes with some limits. He argues, for example, that 'companies are entitled to insist on speech codes'. He also has warm words for the early days of political correctness when, he says, the goal was encouraging politeness rather than prohibiting things.

HEPI readers will perhaps be most interested in the chapter on the imaginary no-platforming at a made-up university of a fictional speaker who opposes gay marriage. The tale is included ostensibly to show why people should engage with arguments they disagree with rather than block them. But it adds little to the overall argument as the same points are made elsewhere in the book, and I cannot help feeling it may have been included to have a pop at students – in which case it might have been better to have used one of the rare but real instances of no platforming that have occurred, such as David Willetts at Cambridge in 2011.[136]

The short and snappy chapters make for an easy read, but not always a persuasive one. While I stayed with Doyle for much of his argument – particularly on his claims about the Orwellian nature of the police recording 'non-crimes' – I departed from his train of thought in the chapter on incitement, a little before his logic crashed into the buffers (or so it seemed to me). This is the longest chapter, at just nine pages, and includes two passing references to the Rwandan genocide, yet neither proves beyond reasonable doubt Doyle's contention that there is no meaningful connection between propagandists and perpetrators. When set aside some of the propaganda I saw on visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the case disintegrates, at least for me.

136 **https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/4115**

Where Doyle is on the firmest ground is at the very end when his paean to free speech sounds like a defence of the academic method:

> ***Debate is not, as some have asserted, a 'fetish'. It is the means by which we forestall the closing of our minds.***

Although Doyle's words are essentially a right-wing takedown of current attempts to limit free speech, they remind me of nothing so much as a HEPI report from 2019 by someone from a different political persuasion.[137] At the time, the author Corey Stoughton worked in a senior position at the human rights organisation Liberty (and she is now the Attorney-in-Charge for Special Litigation at the Legal Aid Society in New York).[138] Her conclusion was:

> ***recognising that not everyone has equal access to speech, and that some people are disproportionately harmed by speech, doesn't justify giving powerful institutions more power to censor speech.***

For both Doyle and Stoughton, free speech must be protected because the advocates of restrictions may find they eventually become the target of those same restrictions. Perhaps the similarities between the arguments of Doyle and Stoughton are not surprising because, as Doyle notes near the start of his book, free speech is not a traditional left / right issue. He notes the main threats to free speech used to come from the right but now come from the left.

I started this review by noting how many people regard universities and the Labour Party as particularly susceptible to the temptation to police people's speech. The Brexit vote was, in some ways, a scream

137 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/06/27/why-it-is-so-important-to-protect-free-speech-in-universities/**

138 Corey Stoughton has since moved to become Special Counsel at Selendy Gay PLLC.

from people who felt their views had been ignored by such institutions. Six years on, the leadership of the Labour Party is responding by refocusing itself away from identity politics and concentrating instead on accepting Brexit, supporting NATO and raising concerns about the rising cost of living. It has clawed its way back to respectability and the result has been a sustained lead in the polls, though the Government's travails have clearly helped secure that too.

Some people would claim universities have not yet made a similarly significant shift in response. The rash of headlines on trigger warnings for children's books and old classics fairly or unfairly paints a picture that suggests the gap between the higher education sector and the general public has continued to grow. In one sense, that is a ridiculous claim, given higher education directly touches more and more people's lives: since the referendum, we have surpassed the point at which half of young people in England attend higher education.[139] But on the other hand, recent polling by HEPI and the UPP Foundation shows the overwhelming majority of people have not knowingly been on a university campus in either the past five years or ever.[140]

That feels like a somewhat vulnerable position to be in, given culture wars continue to be stoked up and Ministers continue to polish their long-awaited response to the Augar report. Could a more robust defence of free speech be an important part of the fightback?

139 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/10/09/its-not-yet-true-that-half-of-young-people-go-to-university/**

140 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/07/28/seven-lessons-from-the-upp-hepi-polling-on-public-attitudes-to-higher-education/**

No Platform: A History of Anti-Fascism, Universities and the Limits of Free Speech (2020) by Evan Smith[141]

23 July 2020

Despite the controversies they raise, 'no platform' policies sound cut and dried. Under the one followed by the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) since the 1970s, for example, you either have a right to speak or you do not. Yet Evan Smith's book shows it is much more complicated than that.

The original NUS No-Platform Policy was adopted in 1974 and aimed 'to refuse assistance (financial or otherwise) to openly racist or fascist organisations or societies'. Sympathisers of such groups were to be prevented 'from speaking in colleges by whatever means necessary'.

Ever since, there has been controversy over what this should mean in practice. Which groups should come within its scope? To what degree should local students' unions and radical student groups follow the NUS's lead? Should people only be stopped from speaking in students' union premises or should they be disrupted when speaking elsewhere too?

In particular, over the years, some people have called for no-platform policies to be extended – to cover sexist, homophobic and anti-abortion speakers as well as, more recently, transphobic ones.

Smith's clear sympathy for the no-platform cause stems partly from its apparent flexibility. '"No platform", as a tactic and a policy', he writes, 'has shifted and changed with the politics of the time, and from the very beginning was altered by individual student unions and student groups to contest different forms of prejudice and oppression.'

The inherent fuzziness of no platforming allowed it to be interpreted in an expansive fashion from the off. For example, the students' union

141 This review first appeared in *Times Higher Education*. It is republished here with the kind permission of their Editor, Chris Havergal. The original piece can still be read at **https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/no-platform-history-anti-fascism-universities-and-limits-offree-speech-evan-smith.**

at the London School of Economics opposed a 1978 speech by the senior Tory Keith Joseph after combining its No-Platform Policy with its view that migration controls were racist. *The Economist* responded by warning students to 'tighten their belts for a thin gruel of speakers from the fringe left'.

No platform is not just a vague policy masquerading as a clear one; it is also a ban masquerading as a policy that favours free expression. Supporters believe that it protects people's rights by limiting the freedom of their oppressors, thereby guaranteeing safe spaces. As a students' union spokesperson at University College Cardiff said in 1986 of a visit by the Conservative politician Enoch Powell, who was notorious for his inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric, some speeches can deny 'the rights of blacks, Jews and Overseas Students to study in an environment free of intimidation and prejudice'.

One challenge is that this argument about rights is circular. The idea that I can protect your rights only by removing someone else's is like saying, 'I have values, you have opinions, they have prejudices'. In 2018, the cross-party parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, chaired by Harriet Harman, largely accepted the NUS's No-Platform policy but still noted: 'Protesters who attempt to prevent viewpoints being heard infringe upon the rights of others.'

Smith's book starts in the 1930s, decades before the NUS adopted its No-Platform Policy, with the growth of British fascism and its opposing force, anti-fascism. It canters through flashpoints such as the British Union of Fascists' disrupted meeting at London's Olympia in 1934 and the infamous Battle of Cable Street in 1936, when anti-fascists and police fought each other while the fascists went home. It then briefly considers the under-researched re-emergence of British fascism in the 1940s and 1950s, when a smattering of groups provided a link between the pre-war fascism of Sir Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts and post-war neo-Nazism.[142]

142 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713999428**

Universities come to the fore only when the book enters the early 1960s. At the time, support for British fascism briefly flickered at some universities, thanks to people such as Max Mosley, Sir Oswald's son, who was Secretary of the Oxford Union. Broadly speaking, right-of-centre students sometimes invited extremist speakers to campuses while left-of-centre students opposed their presence – although the close-up picture drawn in this book reveals that it was sometimes more complicated than that. Among University of Cambridge students, for example, the future centre-right Chancellor of the Exchequer Ken Clarke wanted Mosley to speak while the future Conservative Party leader Michael Howard opposed the idea.

Moreover, it was sometimes university authorities rather than agitated students who opted to no platform invited speakers. The first vice-chancellor of the. University of Leicester, Sir Charles Wilson, banned Mosley from speaking in 1960 by overturning the decision of his students. They had voted to reject their students' union council's previous decision to disinvite him.

These antecedents and others in the late 1960s and early 1970s – including disrupted university visits by Powell, when his anti-migration campaign was at its height – show that the NUS's No-Platform Policy did not suddenly emerge from nowhere. Rather, it was an attempt to adopt a formal approach to controversial speakers after, in Smith's words, numerous 'ad hoc', 'localised' and 'arbitrary' protests.

The NUS has always been an outward-looking body, and it is striking that the No-Platform Policy also emerged in part from a desire to protect international students. This tends to be forgotten now – which is distinctly odd, because the government, universities and students all have a shared interest in ensuring that today's international students, who have been worth £20 billion each year to the UK, remain safe. (The current row about whether Chinese students are safe in Australia confirms the continuing relevance of this issue today.)

The author also ascribes the adoption of the No-Platform Policy to the emergence of an increasingly radical student movement frustrated by domestic politics and events such as the Vietnam War. This is standard

fare and no doubt true. But it is far from the whole story. Given the generosity of student finance after 1962 and the fact that a high proportion of students hailed from upper middle-class backgrounds, the protests also resulted from students having the time and financial resources to be disruptive.[143]

My own more recent experience working for a right-of-centre Minister for Universities who increased undergraduate tuition fees suggests that universities with a large proportion of wealthy students remain more susceptible to protest than those that mainly educate poorer students from under-represented groups. It was only at Cambridge that David Willetts was shouted down in 2011 to the extent that he could not deliver his prepared remarks. Less wealthy students at less prestigious institutions are more likely to be doing part-time work than disrupting invited speakers.

The idea of a free speech crisis in British universities is regularly exaggerated, including by government ministers. As Adam Tickell has written: 'The perception is that we are witnessing a widespread 'chilling' of free speech on university campuses. Look closer and you will see that the evidence for this is vanishingly small.'[144]

Corey Stoughton, a lawyer who has worked in the UK human rights organisation Liberty as well as the New York Civil Liberties Union, has gone further when discussing the Prevent Duty of higher education institutions to stop people from being drawn into terrorism: 'There is a substantial irony in the Government spuriously accusing today's students of threatening free speech when, in fact, the true threat to free speech on campus is the Government's own policies.'[145]

So, much of the ire expressed about the NUS's No-Platform Policy is baseless. Nonetheless, the opposition to no platforming is as old as the

143 **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418**

144 **https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/07/free-speech-warriors-mistake-student-protest-censorship**

145 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Free-Speech-and-Censorship-on-Campus.pdf**

policy itself, and the main problem with this book is that the author's deep sympathy for the idea leads him to downplay the arguments against it. There are five powerful ones.

First, a no-platform policy can increase the focus on a group because people's interests are stoked by controversy. A sure-fire way for a far-right activist to gain sympathetic media coverage is for them to secure an invitation to speak to students and then either to have the invitation rescinded or for the event to descend into chaos. We too readily forget the story of Frankie Goes to Hollywood. Their song *Relax* sold moderately well until it was banned, when it started flying off the shelves. Today, it is the sixth best-selling single in the UK ever.

Secondly, restrictions on free speech have a tendency to come back and bite you on the bum. Banning what you do not like enables others to use your own rules to ban what you might like. Although no platforming has always been designed to counter racism and fascism, in its early days it was used occasionally to enable racist acts, such as banning Jewish societies.

Thirdly, the more individuals and groups that fall foul of no-platform policies, the more people can throw the 'red fascism' claim back at the policies' proponents. The advocates of no platforming then come to look as if they are the ones restricting legitimate free speech in a liberal society. This in turn quickly leads to accusations about the loony left and snowflake students that have a horrible tendency to stick, while increasing the divide between policymakers and those inside educational institutions.

Fourthly, while supporters of no-platform policies believe certain opinions should not be part of the spectrum of legitimate debate, opponents believe that the best way to fight bad ideas is by exposing them to good ideas rather than driving them underground. Smith rejects this, warning pretentiously against 'fetishising the performativity of debating'. While he sees anti-fascist activity as successful in battling extremism, he rejects outright the idea that Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party from 1999 to 2014, was hoisted by his own petard when he appeared on the BBC's

Question Time programme in 2009, saying, 'It has become somewhat of a liberal myth that Griffin's poor performance on the show revealed the true nature of the BNP.'

Fifthly, and most important, no platform has not eradicated the problem it was designed to solve, of extremists engaging with students. So there is a reasonable claim to be made that it has failed on its own terms. Almost 35 years after the NUS adopted its No-Platform Policy, Nick Griffin and the Holocaust denier David Irving spoke to University of Oxford students, just as Oswald Mosley had spoken to them long before.

Yet despite these weaknesses, the NUS collectively, individual students' unions and the societies and clubs within a students' union surely have the same right as the rest of us to decide who they do and who they do not want to hear from. Moreover, more than three-quarters of students backed the NUS's No-Platform Policy when HEPI asked them about it.[146] So in the end, the arguments against no platforming are not killer blows.

Moreover, as one academic quoted in the book asks, 'Is there anyone who honestly believes in an unqualified right of free speech?' Alongside threats to free speech from within universities and students' unions, recent governments of different colours have also been willing to impose them from outside, particularly through their Prevent Duty guidance.

Indeed, the oddest thing about all the recent heated debates around free speech on university campuses is how unpopular Prevent is among people who simultaneously support no platforming and vice versa. Yet they are drawn from the same well.

There are only six organisations currently named by the NUS as coming within its No-Platform Policy: Al-Muhajiroun; the British National Party; the English Defence League (EDL); Hizb-ut-Tahir; the Muslim Public Affairs Committee; and National Action. The first and last of these organisations are also proscribed by the Home Office as 'terrorist

146 **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/05/22/3341/**

organisations', and the others do not engender any sympathy in Whitehall either. For example, Conservatives have previously proposed acting against Hizb ut-Tahrir (and their 2010 manifesto even promised to ban the group), while David Cameron's memoirs say that, as Prime Minister, he regarded Tommy Robinson of the English Defence League as 'an enemy of Britain'. In short, both Prevent and No Platform target a combination of far right and Islamic groups.

That is why, even when the NUS was bringing tens of thousands of students to the streets of London to protest against higher tuition fees, the Cameron-Clegg Coalition Government was funding some of their anti-extremism work.

This serves as a useful reminder that the interests of society and the student movement are actually aligned – even if, tactically, it does neither the NUS nor centre-right administrations any good to admit it.

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Debate

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This collection of pieces gathers together 30 book reviews related to higher education that were written by the HEPI Director during a 13-year period, from 2013 to 2025.

Most of the reviews previously appeared on the HEPI website, but three were published by *Times Higher Education* and one by Wonkhe and these are reproduced here with their kind permission.

The reviews are grouped together into five sections:

A. Education and the state
B. Institutions and students
C. Biographies and autobiographies
D. Statecraft
E. Extremism and free speech

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