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> Learning and teaching has taken place in an organised form across Western Europe since ancient times: university origins lie in the Christian cathedral and monastic schools

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WHY UNIVERSITIES MATTER

Assessing the evolving purpose of the English universities from elite institutions for the education of a privileged minority to engines of social mobility for the masses

The purpose of the university

What is a university and what is it for? Simple questions, though in the case of the English institutions they provoke complex and multifaceted answers. Some might say a university is what the government wants it to be, for it is said, what the state wants in society, first it puts into its educational institutions. It will be argued here that universities and higher education (HE) are worthwhile in their own right in that they transform the lives of individuals. Our HE institutions furthermore shape our society for the better and are powerhouses for economic growth.

Learning and teaching has taken place in an organised form across Western Europe since ancient times: their origins lie in the Christian cathedral and monastic schools; it is difficult to ascertain the exact dates of the foundation of these ancient centres of learning. The *universitas*, the schools or guilds, were corporations of students and masters. Until the 14th century they were a self-regulating community recognised and sanctioned by civil and ecclesiastical authorities. In terms of curriculum, the three most important subjects were grammar, logic and rhetoric. This was known as the *trivium*. Students then progressed to the other liberal arts geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (the *quadrivium*). The curriculum came also to include the three Aristotelian philosophies: physics, metaphysics and moral philosophy; transmissive or didactic teaching, remained the primary focus for hundreds of years.

Scott (1984,14) analyses the changes which took place over time throughout the liberal universities of Europe demonstrating how in early times they stood slightly apart from society, in time and place. Universities' unworldliness and distance from society – a near-spirituality sustained by the superior authority of religion – was exemplified by the privileged nature of the participants, aristocratic and wealthy in financial and cultural terms, the curriculum fitting them for gentlemanly pursuits and emphatically not in preparation for any career.

There was teaching at Oxford, a *universitas* as early as 1096, and in Cambridge in 1206. There were universities founded in Scotland during these early times St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen but not another university in England until University College London in 1826 and University of Manchester in 1824. There were no further university foundations in the UK until the nineteenth century, although the eighteenth century saw the establishment of a number of medical schools such as St George's (1733) the London Hospital Medical College (1785) and the Royal Veterinary College (1791) later to be incorporated into the federated University of London.

In the Victorian age, from 1837 onwards, a long period of relative peace and prosperity was enjoyed in the nation, fuelled by the industrial revolution and the expanding empire, resulting in growing national self-confidence throughout the country. At the turn of the century, large institutions, often referred to as civic universities, were founded by wealthy industrialists in northern and midlands manufacturing and engineering cities such as Birmingham (1900), Manchester Victoria (1903), Leeds (1904) and Sheffield (1905). These universities were designated university colleges but were collegiate in a manner unlike their forebears. They admitted men only, though without reference to social class or religion, and delivered a curriculum focussed on imparting contemporary skills, often linked to engineering. The buildings were imposing, monuments to capitalism and progress.

The university's coming of age

Throughout the decades following Britain's involvement in two world wars the British government and people were impatient to make progress – to re-build a new society led by technology. Universities came to be seen as the engines of production, knowledge creation displaced the education of students at the heart of institutional endeavour. Universities saw themselves as key players in the process of social change specifically their role in producing highly skilled labour and research output to meet perceived economic needs. Hence a shift in the paradigm governing the purpose of a university occurred, driven not least by the technological revolution hungry for an educated workforce. As the sixties emerged, the fear that Europe and the US was losing ground, in terms of scientific development, to the Soviets, resulted in demand exacerbating for advanced technological and scientific knowledge production, so 10 Colleges of Advanced Technology [CATs], were founded. Later, Birmingham CAT became Aston University, Brunel CAT became Brunel University, Bristol CAT became the Bath University of Technology in 1966 (afterwards University of Bath).

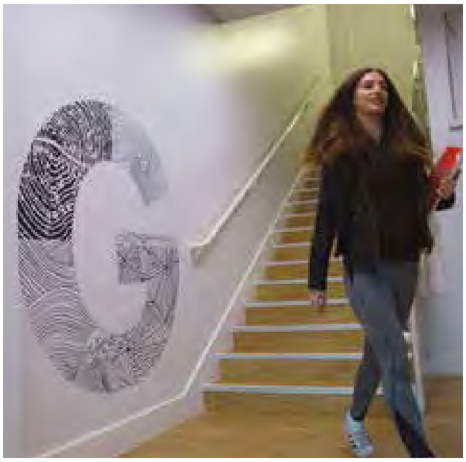
What is more, the 'bulge babies' born after WWII reached university age in the sixties. With the sheer increase in numbers of 18 year olds, a number of new universities – known variously as campus universities, green fields or plate glass – were established in cities like York, Lancaster and Norwich and in counties such as Surrey, Sussex and Essex. The government had appointed a committee in 1961 chaired by Lord Robbins, tasked with: '[reviewing] the pattern of full-time higher education (HE) in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty's Government on what principles its long-term development should be published. (Robbins Report by HMSO in 1963). Robbins was concerned to address a perceived gap in vocational HE especially since the CATs had been given university status. In particular he emphasised the need to widen access and cautioned against any dilution of quality. Many of his most important recommendations were not accepted and for nearly 30 years the pattern of development that it proposed was in abeyance.

Who is a university for?

Hitherto, unlike many comparator nations, participation in higher education in UK H.E had historically been very low. In the 1950s only 3.4% of young people had a university education, in the sixties, 4.2% increasing to 8.4% in 1970. (Parliament UK, 2012). So, if the purpose of the university is to extend human understanding and engagement with civic values, then over 90% of the population were denied that privilege. On 18th October 1976, Prime Minister Callaghan made a seminal speech at Ruskin College Oxford arguing for a huge expansion of degree level courses and post-graduate degrees to be offered by non-university institutions thus laying the foundations for what came to be known as the *binary system* of HE, universities on the one side and the further expanded polytechnic sector on the other, though the divide was far from clear cut and somewhat blurred by the nomenclature , university colleges, 'polys' which had enjoyed a number of previous incarnations and variously named technical institutions including further education (FE) colleges offering HE courses. It is worth noting that the principal aim was to widen as well as *increase* participation in advanced education, these developments having been predicted by government advisor Eric Robinson who contended that, '…the future pattern of HE in this country can be set in the development of these institutions as comprehensive people's universities' (Robinson, 1968:193) signalling a marked shift from the erstwhile socially exclusive institutions of the past.

Unfortunately, it was not only the problem of status, always an issue in class-conscious Britain, which bedevilled these new polytechnics, but crucially, the issue of purpose. Both flanks of the binary divide offered bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctorates. The polytechnics however, swiftly began to withdraw the offer of their traditional vocational qualifications such as the Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas, see Walker 2010. The move was criticized as 'academic drift' (Pratt and Burgess 1974:50) but ironically, this was later accompanied by a 'vocational drift' on the part of the universities responding to student demand. Over time the two sectors became fairly homogeneous in terms of course provision so there was little to choose between them. In 1992, the government decided to dissolve the binary divide and re-designated the polytechnics and other HEIs as universities.

The polytechnics swiftly moved to enhance their image with new names and new logos but almost before the paint was dry, HE commentators began to dub them 'the new universities' despite many of them having been in existence in one form or another, as demonstrated above, since the 1800s –to



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distinguish them from the 'old' universities some of which had only come into being in the 1960s. Not everyone in UK was enthusiastic about the re-purposing of the universities. Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher wrote in her memoirs that the universities had been expanded too quickly in the 1960s, and in many cases (in her view) standards had fallen and the traditional character of the universities had been lost see Thatcher 1995.

The university as a public good

The term modern university tends to be used for those institutions which the late nineteenth century reformers dedicated to free inquiry and the advancement of knowledge, as *mass* institutions. This is not only in the sense of increased numbers of students relative to the mediaeval institutions, but in the consciousness that knowledge from that point onward was in a sense mass-produced as opposed to what Rueben refers to as the 'artisanal production of knowledge' (1984:54). If the education system is the expression of the nation, the university system can perhaps be seen as an expression of the age.

Historically, and perhaps because education was seen as a public good, British students were not required to pay university tuition fees; HE was funded by the public purse. Students from overseas however, from whom there was an established demand, paid at the point of delivery. Numbers of overseas students rose year on year particularly as the newly independent nations of the Commonwealth endeavoured to educate their younger generation to meet the development needs of their respective countries. In 1969 with demand from home and overseas rising, a decision was taken to levy a differential fee for overseas students.

A decade later in 1980 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher moved to impose tuition fees on international students reckoned on a full-cost basis. She calculated that students from overseas, perceiving a university education as an essential 'good' in economics usage, would be willing to pay for it personally, thus opening up a vital income stream for universities and the UK economy, the justification being that non-UK domiciled students should not benefit from taxation to which they had not contributed. Whilst many overseas students were funded by their respective governments, some educationists feared that the increased costs would impact on the ability of students from poorer countries to continue their education, which concern was realised initially but not subsequently. Notwithstanding, from this point onwards a price tag was attached to a British university education which re-purposed into a marketable commodity. After Thatcher's death it was claimed she,

> '.... waged war on the universities. In particular she felt that the universities were complacent because they were over-protected from the market. She therefore introduced them to greater accountability and to market forces' (Kealey 2013).

Certainly, the policy realised the opening up of a vital income stream for the UK economy and individual institutions. Kealey opines, 'Mrs. Thatcher's policy was a success. After a transient dip in international student numbers, they have soared ever since, to provide a vast influx of funding and the beginnings of a market to British universities'.

So HE found itself in a relationship with the economy, marketing its goods like that of any other corporation or firm. It followed inexorably that the purpose of, especially the curriculum, and its alignment with pedagogies and assessment, would edge closer to the needs of the workforce and the career agendas of the students.

The university as a business

Because international students' status had changed from guest to client, they came to acquire a degree of what might be considered 'consumer power'. Universities began to seriously consider the efficacy of established traditional practices, like linear course design and three terms across the year and began to develop policies and practices which were client sensitive. Modular courses, a preparatory or enabling curriculum, foundation courses began to evolve. A climate was developing in which innovation and flexible responses to diversity became more commonplace. This climate was to become increasing receptive to the underrepresented non-traditional students in the home market.

In 1997 there was a change of government and incoming Prime Minister Tony Blair was determined to emphasise HE's crucial role in supporting social mobility. He therefore set out to increase participation rates throughout the UK. Universities' expertise in marketing HE internationally was directed towards achieving this goal. Not only the under-30s were targeted but women returning to learn, mid-career professionals desirous of post-graduate qualifications and, especially in London, home students from the successive waves of immigrants from the enlarging European Union, as well as those from the traditional sending areas of the erstwhile British Empire and Commonwealth. The post-92 universities were ready with their enabling curriculum of flexible programs and e-learning platforms to optimize learning opportunities. Whilst developed for orienting overseas students into an unfamiliar learning environment, these arrangements were to ease a new, non-traditional, home student population, into the culture of HE.

Blair chose to finance HE expansion by cost-sharing with those who would benefit financially from a university education so required student to contribute £1,000 initially, towards tuition. It was feared that the change in financial responsibility from the state to the individual would threaten the strategy of HE expansion. Initially, this was not the case. Blair saw HE and the knowledge society as drivers of a prosperous economy and cohesive society, so set a target of 50% of all 18-30-year olds to experience HE by 2012 which was universal participation in Trow's terms an ambitious target given the history of under-representation in this country (Trow 1973). By 2010, however, under New Labour's education and employment policy, that target was fast becoming a reality. Figures from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, confirmed the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) for 2010/11 was 46% pushing up to 49% the next year. In 2010 Labour lost the general election and the Coalition which replaced them had a different agenda for HE.

The threat to universal participation

Seeking domestic savings with immediate effect the Conservative led coalition cut the existing universities' teaching grant by 80% and removed the cap on student numbers. Universities in England swiftly responded with the imposition of a fees hike which made Thatcher's policy benign in comparison; from £3000 an almost threefold increase to £9,000, whilst some specialist institutions and science courses fees were higher. The scramble for extra students began. Margaret Thatcher's vow that 'international students will not be a burden on the taxpayer' was echoed by the newly appointed universities minister who vowed, 'students will not be a burden on the taxpayer'. (Guardian 2010).

The policy was deeply unpopular with students and initially with universities who baulked at pressure from government to derive their revenue principally from fees and services to students. With the imminent loss of government funding the obvious reaction was a recruitment drive to increase student numbers; international, home, and non-traditional. There were a number of problems with this strategy, not least the decline in the number of 18- year olds, the traditional university cohort, which had been predicted by the

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National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) as far back as 1989. Willets, the universities minister, referring to the lifting of the cap on numbers said, 'This is what our reforms are all about, putting choice and power in the hands of students'. The University and College Union accused ministers of wanting to return us to a time when money, not ability, mattered most for success. Although overall the number of full time students had not declined the numbers of part-time and older people had. UCU warned that if we want to compete with other leading economies and produce highly-skilled workers as the government claimed, we cannot afford to have a system that erects barriers to the means of social mobility for the masses. , '…we must strengthen democratic social values and re-strengthen the educational alternative to money and inheritance as determinants of social participation and selection' (Marginson, 2015). Of which, thus far, a university education had been a powerful determinant. However, encouraging the previously unrepresented classes had never been a view espoused by the British establishment. Ann Widdecombe, former Conservative politician wrote in the Daily Express in 2011.

> The real problem is that we have too many universities, too many students in them, too many Mickey Mouse degrees and too many of the old polytechnics obliged to masquerade as third-rate universities when they could be first rate vocational institutions'

This view was later expressed somewhat satirically by a practising academic,

> It was an elite, class fenced, activity in the 50s. Today it's a commercial commodity, open to everyone and anyone - the supermarketisation of HE! We now have universities ranging from the Lidl level right up to Fortnum and Mason via Waitrose level (Izbudak 2013).

When in 2014 Universities Minister David Willett signalled a further expansion in the number of HE providers, including private, the *Telegraph* published the violent response of former Vice-Chancellor Sir Roderick Floud, '… close half of Britain's messy muddled universities because we've got too many'.

In their plan for growth, the government had claimed that they attached great importance to education and hi- tech industry in order to promote jobs and prosperity. The jobs of the future would increasingly require people with capabilities and skills that a STEM education provides. A House of Lords report however claimed, 'Apparently there is a mismatch between the *supply* of STEM graduates and postgrads HEI's are supplying and the demand from employers.' So the government gave universities freedom to recruit as many students as they liked whilst simultaneously directing them to the importance of STEM subjects to the economy. Can we see this as free market, liberal market, or quasi liberal market, bearing in mind the government also polices quality and standards, assurance, and student complaints.

Universities matter to governments

It is important to get this right because Universities certainly matter to the state and there are a number of reasons why.

UK universities and their students generate significant economic activity equal to £95 billion gross output in 2014–15 and make a substantial contribution to GDP, equal to £52.9 billion gross value added (GVA), supports almost 944,000 jobs of all skill levels in the economy – generates £14.1 billion worth of tax receipts for the government that can be reinvested into public services, which is equivalent to 2.7% of all tax receipts received by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in 2014–15. Moreover, the NUS claims that student expenditure supports 80bn of UK's economic output. As for international students (i.e. from outside the EU) in London alone a net contribution of £2.3bn (fees, spending, family visits) is made, more than they use in public services. Currently about 4 out of 10 young adults are graduates engaging in the workforce and earning it is estimated, £9k more than non-graduates. Furthermore, 93% of students in some universities (the University of West London for instance) were in employment within 6 months of graduating, an achievement not matched by some Russel Group institutions, thus contributing through taxation and spending power to government coffers. The eroding of public funding has caused institutions to use their skills in knowledge production to engage in research collaborations and flexible working practices with business resulting in £3.5bn across the sector.

This all sounds very positive until we factor in that the knowledge industry, for such it is, has to a certain extent resulted in a loss of collegiality. As we have seen, institutions are operating on business lines, and rival providers, not only private but HE courses offered by FE colleges, means there is competition for students who are wielding their consumer power.

Cynics might say it is not selection of students but seduction and in a crowded market jostling for students, financial risk is exacerbated, some institutions may go to the wall, go bankrupt, or be forced to merge.

And the playing fields are uneven. Those institutions regarded as prestigious, that grew from an advantageous position century ago, have been able to build on that advantage, through endowments and the sponsorship of wealthy alumni, to continue to improve their relative position and outstrip their rivals. The market works this way unless corrected by policy, so a clear relationship has developed between resource rich universities and student competition for places, resulting in market stratification. The HEA claimed in 2014,

'Higher education is being profoundly reshaped by its marketisation, with league tables, branding, discourses of 'excellence' and competition for students framing such moves… In the contemporary context of English higher education there is increasing pressure for universities to position themselves as 'world-class', to compete in a highly stratified field'.

Universities matter to students

The data confirms this. HESA's first release of official student enrolment data for 2016/17 shows an increase in the number of students in higher education, though a decline in part-time students. The provisional Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) that measures participation for 17-30 year old England domiciled first time entrants for 2015/16 was 49%. This was an increase of 1.4 percentage points from the previous year, a steady rise since 2006/07 (other than the fluctuation of 2011/12 and 2012/13, coinciding with the introduction of a higher tuition fee cap). Whilst the HEIPR for both males and females has increased, the gender gap in 2015/16 widened and is estimated to be 11.9 percentage points, up from 10.2 percentage points a year earlier with females continuing to lead. It is interesting to reflect that women students at Oxford, regardless of the quality of their work and grades earned, were not allowed to graduate from the university until 1920. Today, it is more likely for women to study at university than men.

Higher education has the power to change people's lives, a point which may have been missed by the government during the last election. In a Manifesto of 84 pages there were about 200 words basically reiterating their previous promise to 'abolish the cap on higher education student numbers' so, onwards towards the faux free market and the concept of education as a marketable commodity. Supply is a given, with the proliferation of new providers. In terms of demand, it seems increasingly clear that in a meritocratic society where the highly educated can command higher salaries, a university is now an essential good in economic terms, a long term object of capital investment which individuals will endeavour to find the resources to finance.

It is equally clear that any commodity, and HE is no exception, will require consumer satisfaction. Consumerist technologies which increasingly are used to foster (or fake) greater competition between institutions, and between departments occasioning stress to academics and students. Alleging to demonstrate transparency and accountability, all manner of performance indicators and surveys of students and recent graduates are paraded in the public domain. Moreover, data from surveys use selective counting with only certain aspects of university life analysed, are then compiled as league tables (Walker 2016, 2010).

Universities transform lives. They encourage students to see the world differently, to engage with new networks, and break through their existing boundaries to future opportunities for employment and otherwise. So how is it that there seems to be invisible but unsurmountable barriers to the participation of some groups. Fewer people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds participate in HE and when they do they tend not to do as well as their more privileged peers and without robust data on socio-economic status is not easily available, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification as a measure, having been discontinued following concerns about the validity of the data. A great deal of attention has been paid by educators in the early years sector, on the challenges facing low income children from their entry into the foundation stage of education, but without a comprehensive analysis informing and underscoring class attentive policies and practices the current inequity in participation will continue.

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Conclusion

It is incontestable that the British university has evolved as a major world class centre, characterised by internationalisation and globalisation. Its strong reputation, facilities and relationships will certainly not disappear overnight but may be under threat. The HE sector is united in its determination to maintain current levels of opportunity for all, not least those who are currently underrepresented, black and minority ethnic, students with special educational needs, disabled, and young people brought up in the care of the local authorities. The nation's students – both domestic and international – will be important voices in the discussions yet to come. They may decide they will not collude with the remorseless commodification of knowledge, but neither will they be its victims.

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About the author

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