

Chapter 6

Too Great Expectations of Higher Education

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Introduction

Nowhere has the Thatcherite mantra of raising standards through competition unraveled faster than in higher education. As all teachers know, ‘standards’ are not merely a code for valuing traditional academic knowledge and assessment over any other approach. They are also a means of measurement so as to stick numbers on qualities that are otherwise unquantifiable and rank them in order of consumer choice. This process in education, as in health (see Leys & Player 2011), was completed under the New Labour government’s marketization of public services. As a result, ‘delivery agents’ – as schools, colleges and universities with their staffs – have become, are in competition with each other for ‘consumers’ – as parents, pupils and students have become. In the name of raising standards, rival claims to ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ are monitored and inspected by central government agencies like Ofsted, which relentlessly set ‘agents’ new targets to fail. However ruthless and desperate the struggle for survival in education becomes, this is still what has been called a ‘quasi-market’ as no money is directly involved. Save in the private schools, consumers do not pay more for higher standards and private providers seeking profit for investors from the services they offer are limited, though repeatedly encouraged. Competition between public sector providers is therefore for ‘customers’ to whom monetary value is attached by the central state, enabling some

institutions to accrue surpluses whilst others are increasingly indebted. Mergers and closures, conglomerations and chains thus follow in a market-led restructuring of education such as has already occurred and continues in FE.

Higher education is an important exception to this moneyless marketization as fees for English undergraduate home students were introduced for the first time in 1997 when grants were also abolished, leaving students without other income dependent on maintenance loans on top of repaying their fees. Paradoxically however, a market still does not exist with variable prices for different ‘standards’ of provision. This is because nearly all ‘providers’/ universities have raised their fees to the maximum £9,000 currently allowed and outside provision is still limited. When fees are uncapped, it can be anticipated that ‘top universities’ will raise their prices to whatever the market will bear and institutions will be strung out along a range of variably and individually priced courses so that a free market will then exist, as it already does in postgraduate provision.

Meanwhile, because student loans for fees do not have to be repaid for so long and only then if earning above the median wage, ‘customers’/ students are still applying – although some whole groups have been lost (adults and part-timers long ago, many white working-class males more recently). (This could change if repayment terms are altered by government to encourage private speculators to buy the student loan book and/or if repayments were to begin at a lower threshold, say £18k instead of £21k. The government will have to do something since it has already acknowledged it does not expect more than a third of what will be a £191 billion debt to be recovered by 2046 when outstanding balances will begin to be written off after 30 years (McGettigan

2013). (No wonder HE Minister, David Willetts, is under pressure to leave! He, however, calculates on reducing student numbers drastically.) Also, because the 2.1 degree that is now obtained by half of graduates has become the new threshold for perhaps half of all jobs available to young people, it is worth becoming indebted up to £27k student loan + maintenance loan + 3% interest on top of rate of inflation on both (McGettigan estimated an average of £40k) in hopes of the ‘15 per cent higher lifetime earnings than people with lower qualifications’ that the Million+ group of former-polytechnic universities claim as their ‘graduate premium’ (Hadfield *et al* 2012). Or instead, entering oversubscribed ‘apprenticeships’ – ‘professional’ or not – as long as they lead to a job; ‘internships’ and post-graduate courses similarly. As Martin Allen points out, ‘Pupils and students will do anything they have to to get the grades they need’.

This is where the mantra of ‘standards’ falls down, as students pay more for less, so that many courses offer notoriously little in the way of knowledge or learning and relations between teachers and students are corrupted as all involved pretend that they do. 20% of UK students ‘read’ (!) Business Studies but many more take business-related modules on other courses reduced towards bite-sized learning in a repetitive carousel of non-cumulative learning guided only by ‘student choice’ (McArdle-Clinton 2008). Lecturers are also locked into a *simulacrum* of supposedly ‘vocationally-related’ training that has less and less to do with students’ real lives and experiences. Even – or especially – at the ‘highest’ academic levels, exam regurgitation tests levels of literacy as a proxy for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. Further down the food-chain, young people lacking other opportunities seek *The Pleasures of Being a Student* (Cheeseman 2011) on an increasingly pre-packaged experience without much thought to what they will

do afterwards when many inevitably return to their parental homes. Especially young women, who are generally better qualified for entry and have been the majority in most subjects – including prestigious ones like medicine and law – in HE worldwide for some time (details in Leathwood and Reid 2009). For those nominally ‘full-time’ students who live at home to save money, attending local HE is often peripheral to their social lives and supposedly ‘part-time’ work. Yet still parents and teachers, schools and colleges urge students on to what many of them see as a *Triumph of Emptiness* (Alvesson 2013).

So what went wrong?

All this has been achieved by placing *Students at the heart of the system* as the 2011 White Paper is titled. Even without subsequent legislation (see McGettigan *o.c.*), this marked the end, not only of higher education as it has developed since the war but – more broadly – of the whole effort to reform society through education (Apple 2013). It closed a phase of progressive reform that began in 1963 with the recommendation by Robbins of the expansion of HE beyond the limited pool who were previously considered educable to all ‘qualified by ability and attainment’ to benefit. Robbins thus preserved a selective system and was not an entitlement or even expectation for all who graduated high school as in the republican French and original US model. Following Robbins, the official introduction of comprehensive schools from 1965 was not accompanied by curricular reform so that comprehensives were left competing for still selective university entry with the surviving grammars and private schools on the uneven playing field of academic A-levels, even after the introduction of GCSEs in 1986. Primary schools were, however, freed for child-centred education while there was also further growth of FE and technical education. Unlike 11+ selection, which became a thing of the past in 80 % of

English secondary schools and more in Scotland and Wales, reforming state education at all levels no longer aimed to reinforce existing social hierarchies but to break down class divisions by opening equal opportunities to careers for all. The logic of comprehensive reform carried forward to inclusion of children with special needs, a common exam at 16 and a National Curriculum presented to teachers as an entitlement for all, as well as – more recently – widening participation in HE to nearly half of 18-30 year olds.

Now Coalition education policy aims at a *Great Reversal* (Allen and Ainley 2013) to minority HE. A cap-free market in fees variable by course and institution could leave Arts and Humanities to overseas students and others who are seriously rich at elite and surviving campus universities. Other universities and colleges could collapse around their technical departments for as long as Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine STEM subjects remain centrally funded, the rest merging into local e-learning hubs proffering two-year degrees by part-time and distance provision if they are not bought-out or taken-over (see McGettigan again). For some time a tertiary tripartism has distinguished internationally selecting and researching Russells from nationally recruiting and mainly teaching campus universities as against locally clearing and training institutions (Weyers and Ainley 2008).

This did not all happen just because post-modernist academics lost the plot! The ‘literary turn’ that took over the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s created a new academic orthodoxy misapprehending wider changes in Western society. Rather than the result of some new Foucauldian discourse, they were a consequence of economic and technical shifts in employment triggered by change in the organic composition of capital exacerbating the falling rate of

profit and leading in turn to speculative instead of productive investment. They were imposed by political changes leading to a new form of global, 'free-market' state in place of the national Keynesian welfare state in which progressive and social democratic change had been possible. Despite Bernstein's 1970 warning that *Education cannot compensate for society*, teachers at all levels typically continued to believe that it could. This was partly because of our own experience of education, particularly higher education which grew from c.2%, mostly young men, in 1945 to c.7%, including a growing proportion of women, by the time the baby-boomers went to university in the late 1960s. This was a generation of students most of whose parents – even if middle class – did not themselves go to higher education but these students' HE experience made them middle class if they were not already.

The new universities of the 1960s aimed to spread (more thinly, their detractors said) traditional HE in the arts, humanities and social sciences, while extending sciences to the Colleges of Advanced Technology elevated to University status. Instead of more Robbins universities, the polytechnics from 1965-1992 aimed at both an HE on the cheap and a new HE for adult students living locally (as in Robinson 1968). Despite some brave experiments, eg. Independent Study at East London Polytechnic and Lancaster University, this proved illusory (see Robbins 1988). So too did the latest phase of widening participation to HE sustained on a reduced unit of resource from 2003-2011 by faith in the transformative powers of new ICT to include nearly half of 18-30 women at least – fallen by 2012 to c. one third of 18+ women and a quarter of men. Recruitment overall was down about 10% in 2012 but has recovered somewhat this year, though academic confidence that 'normal service has resumed' cannot be taken for granted. Nearly all universities raised their entry thresholds last year; now many

have brought them down again. All but Oxbridge plus LSE were forced into clearing this year for at least some subjects, leaving others in the expanded 'top' Russell Group to compete with each other to attract AAB (last year) and ABB (this year) A-level grade students. Some, eg. Southampton and Liverpool, lost out badly in 2012 as Bristol broke the cartel to take in extra numbers. The 'Real Russells', by contrast, characteristically restrict their undergraduate intake to increase demand and leave their academics more room for research. This year the competition is even more ferocious.

'Widening participation' has not led to fair or equal access to equal types of higher education or outcomes in the labour market. Nor has it increased social mobility to 'transform lives' as academics sometimes fancy that they do. (UCU recently conducted a campaign to boost this self-image among its members). In fact, the opposite is the case; as elsewhere in education, the system functions to keep people in their place. Social divisions are heightening and hardening in HE, where the general rule is that the older the university, the younger, whiter, more male and posher its students. (Warwick University is an exception that only proves this rule.) More Black and minority ethnic applicants may enter HE but they graduate with lower grades at lower status HEIs. As David summarized, there are '*systemic and systematic forms of inequality for individuals and institutions across subjects and levels of education*' (2009, 150 *Italicized for emphasis in original*). Like Thatcher's previous encouragement of home ownership, or at least mortgage borrowing, that contributed to the subsequent bubble in unproductive capital, this presented itself as a professionalization of the proletariat while disguising a proletarianisation of the professions, as automation leading to the deskilling and outsourcing that were evident to Braverman amongst US craft workers in 1974 have worked their way up the employment

hierarchy to previously secure professionals. This includes notably an academic profession reduced towards the contractual conditions of wage labour.

Teachers are another case in point, professionalizing themselves by association with HE Schools of Education from FE trade training colleges (a move now being reversed by Gove back to an apprentice training model in schools). But with ‘standards’ dictated by central government agency, teacher training is also an example of increasingly prevalent FE in HE as education is reduced to competence training. (This is not to disparage FE – indeed, FE and HE would ideally combine in what Silver 2004 called ‘Thick HE’, going ‘further’ at the same time as going ‘higher’. Nor does it fail to recognize that you cannot have education without training but you can – and increasingly do – have training without education.) Nevertheless, teacher training’s association with HE has to be defended and extended beyond standards-based training towards a research-informed teacher education. This would be opposed to Gove’s private school model in which teachers are born and not made, so no training – let alone education – is necessary (see Simon 1985). Possibly, such training of ‘the schools workforce’ as the New Labour government began calling it, exemplifies the new correspondence with employment – if there is one and education is not economically dysfunctional save as a means of social control – because many HE students now aspire to graduate to similar service sector professional and paraprofessional roles as are available in schools to teachers and their assistants.

As for research – which Weaver (1974) indicated is often mistaken to be privileged as ‘knowledge production’ over teaching as ‘knowledge reproduction’ within HE, as well as over schools and colleges – as Harvey noted as long ago as 1986 in *The Condition of*

Postmodernity (160),

‘the universities in the industrially developed countries are shifting from being guardians of national knowledge to ancillaries in the production of knowledge for global corporations’.

Marketised by successive competitive research assessment/excellence exercises,

‘Research selectivity has been used not just to concentrate research funding but to restructure the system by determining institutional missions and status.’ (Brown and Carasso 2013, 134)

Meanwhile, in the new mixed economy, private sector penetration of increasingly entrepreneurial public universities is perverting the 1918 Haldane principle that public funds for research should be allocated on the basis of academic criteria, not political or economic considerations. This is producing new medico-industrial university complexes far removed from Polanyian ideals of ‘communities of science’. Most science students, however, graduate to be lab-technicians if they are lucky while many engineering departments in F&HE have closed for lack of employment for their students. Traditional empiricism still inhibits cross-disciplinarity and public intellectuality, so that science and higher education generally has reneged on its role of critically learning from the past in order not to repeat it in the future – particularly in relation to climate change (see Ainley 2008).

Rather than responding to the needs of a non-existent ‘knowledge economy’ in which supposedly high skilled jobs predominate over the mass of deskilled and routinized employment that actually exists in a society in which the occupational class structure has gone pear-shaped, education is increasingly unable to fulfil the

expectations it raises. It is thus losing its validity as a way forward for the younger generations. Unconnected to possibilities for practice, displaying knowledge for assessment has replaced learning. This *simulacrum* of study disguises the decline in attainment – if not the increase in effort – all teachers recognize. Developing an alternative requires a different set of values and concepts to address the perennial question of what education should be for. Nevertheless, any alternative for young people – as for society as a whole – must begin with the economy and an end to austerity in the UK and EU (see Patomaki 2013). Recovery also has to be sustainable. To think that things can go on as they are adds only to what Alvesson (2013, *o.c.* 216-7) calls the ‘functional stupidity’ to which he sees education, mass entertainment, the media and especially advertising, contributing – ‘a socially supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification [that]... means you refrain from critical thinking, reflection and the posing of broader questions about values, ideals, and representations of reality.’

So what are the alternatives?

The market is so omnivorous even positive alternatives, like efforts at Lincoln University to do away with grading, tend to get assimilated as brands if they are successful. System-wide reform is therefore necessary (see Burns 2012) as well as larger social change, such as return to progressive taxation rather than any proposed graduate tax in place of fees, even reduced ones (to £6,000 as Labour proposed – though whether this is still their policy or whether they would ever implement it in government is not clear). Peter Scott at Brighton University’s 2013 Convention for Higher Education was surely right to call for ‘a revival of radical thinking about HE’, whilst ‘accepting that HE needed reform but not this reform’. (Cf. Camila Vallejo, the Chilean

student leader, widely quoted on the internet as saying, ‘We want to improve the educational system but not this one. We must move towards a more inclusive, truly democratic and just system.’) Therefore to celebrate and not apologise for a mass system and fight for an increase in student numbers not ‘consolidation’ – ‘the job is only half done!’ as Scott said. This is not to demand everyone necessarily attends HE at 18. Many do not want to – including many who are there! There should however be a universal entitlement to do so based on a general certificate of high school graduation. This will require what Spours and Hodgson (2012) call *A unified ecosystem vision* of schools and colleges in relation to universities.

In such a regionally integrated learning system, for students for whom, as Gerald Graff remarks, ‘the very words “education” and “academic” are opaque’ (2003, 274), the whole purpose of university has to be represented. Many students do not see the point of discussion from different perspectives, nor do they understand how to distinguish between them with reference to evidence or argument. They have not heard Clint Eastwood in the film *Every which way but loose* dismiss opinions as resembling a piece of anatomy common to men and women: ‘Everyone’s got one!’ Many students lack the confidence to make warranted assertions and fall back upon clichés or their own personal ‘feelings’ and prejudices. Thus, like our former-Prime Minister Blair they only know what they believe, instead of, like the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi (1956, 266), believing in what they know.

In Scots and US universities there is a first-year foundation that is impossible in England – necessary and desirable though this is to bring students up to speed – because it would represent an extra year’s fee. In the USA, this year makes space for courses that

attempt some intellectual socialization into the on-going conversations of academic culture, unlike our own inductions which largely restrict themselves to study skills, time-management and tours of the library and IT facilities, including the student support that has become virtually virtual. The crisis of student (academic) literacy which such foundation years might help to address is combined with one of legitimacy as the widened student body desperately hopes their expensively purchased degrees will gain them what Ken Roberts (personal communication) calls ‘an “intermediate” starting occupation’ on graduation. This at least forced some academics to agree what is important in the subjects they taught as they sought to adapt tertiary level learning to new generations of students in the way comprehensive school teachers previously struggled to open secondary schooling to the mass of the population. That this effort was first made in ‘The Bad Universities’ – as defined negatively by *The Times* ‘Good University Guide’ – contributes to the denigration of such efforts, seen by the elite as abandoning ‘academic standards’.

Moreover, it is in these ‘Bad Universities’ that the pressure is on to reduce traditional programmes towards two-year degrees, either as Foundation ‘degrees’ or as three-year courses delivered over two years to include the summer in order to utilise plant and staff more efficiently. Or merely as preliminary to post-graduate – perhaps doctoral – ‘real HE’ since so many taught Masters now churn around in one year. (Instead of reducing course lengths, a 2+2+2+2 model of Part 1 and 2 four-year undergraduate degree, followed by two years Masters and two years Doctorate would be much simpler and preferable to the confusion that currently exists; it would also accord with the original 1988 Bologna declaration on credit accumulation and transfer across the European region.)

‘The Bad Universities’ are also those where most students live locally and are in part-time if not full-time employment – sometimes in several part-time jobs simultaneously if they can find them (see O’Leary 2013). Their students also have the greatest needs and disabilities such as dyslexia (over-diagnosed though this probably is). Raised and differentiated fees will heighten instead of concealing these differences, pitting students and staff in competition with one another; a competition in which it is tempting for Students Unions to join by pressing the claims of their members as consumers. Moreover, as Cheeseman remarks (2013), ‘Student culture has reoriented itself over the years, away from institutionally specific local cultures to a national and increasingly international, mediated youth culture.’ Pedagogic coherence can be recovered through emphasising the contributions to knowledge that students can make in their chosen academic disciplines or fields of practice through independent research, scholarship, creation or application in their final year. This should be made clear to undergraduates at induction and the first and second years of their programmes should build towards it.

Students can be progressively introduced to the debates integral to the on-going constitution of their field of study or application preparatory to making a contribution to it. They will thus become familiar with the canon of texts and experiments, or cases as exemplars, presenting the conceptual tools with which to order the field’s information base. They can then recognise that the truth claims they make in the wider world of public debate and professional practice accord with the accepted criteria of scientific and logical proof and so go beyond personal admissions of opinion, belief or prejudice. *Expertise* (Collins & Evans 2007), combining skill and knowledge, can also be developed in final year dissertations to make creation, experiment, research or scholarship an integral part

of the Independent Study of all students, rather than separating teaching from research. This in essence is the answer to the vexed question of research in HE: research must be generalised to as many teachers and students as possible, including in schools and colleges/ adult continuing education.

Generalising research/ scholarship/ experiment and creation does not preclude dedicated and state-funded specialist research institutes such as already exist in this and other countries, especially for ‘Big Science’, but in general teaching should be combined with research as a means of introducing students to an academic community that critically learns from the past to change behaviour in the future. The undergraduate dissertation can then be developed to emphasize the contribution that students can make to that continuing cultural conversation as the final degree demonstration of higher level gradueness. Such development will widen the still available critical space afforded by higher education in which a defence of the public university can be conducted (Holmwood 2012). This should bring together staff and students, instead of antagonising them in the way that putting customers/ *students at the heart of the system* does. Nor can (higher) education be merely for its own sake as Collini (2012) suggested. It is much more important than that!

As UNESCO’s 1997 *Resolution on Higher Education* states: ‘higher education is directed to human development and to the progress of society’. In a democratic society, deciding on the nature of development and progress (increasingly to recognize what is necessary for human survival and how to ensure it), is the common practice of citizens for which a general education in schools should not only prepare them for assumption of full and independent citizenship at 18 but engage them in from the earliest years. Such a foundational education should also be informed by the discussion,

research and scholarship preserved and developed by post-compulsory further, higher and adult continuing education in a process of critical cultural transmission, creation and recreation. This would transform learning at all levels to be no longer so obsessively dedicated to selection for employment. Students should learn about work as well as to work – a principle that should apply to all work experience and placements in schools as well as in colleges/ universities, including properly paid and regulated apprenticeships and internships.

The changing occupational structure, with so many employed part-time in a new social formation of a working-middle/ middle-working class in a class structure going pear-shaped, potentiates a base for support of such a progressive education. But, as ever, the insecurities of this precarious majority have been repeatedly directed by government and dominant media towards antagonism against the ‘new rough’ so-called ‘underclass’, presented as ‘undeserving poor’ and blamed for their own situation. The new class formation puts in question Gramscian hegemony based upon a traditional working class but (at least according to Mason 2012) creates the possibility of resistance *Kicking Off Everywhere*, stimulated by new media. Certainly, the new generations have little chance to organise at their work, which is part-time and irregular at best, and the traditional political activities of their parents – like public meetings, let alone leafleting and lobbying – are felt to be ineffective and largely irrelevant, or at least too long-term, such is the urgency of youth’s situation. However, in contrast to Standing 2011, who sees an almost inevitable conflict between the established and ‘privileged’ old working class and a new and youthful *precariat*, Allen and Ainley (*o.c.*) argue that a new politics will still need the old alliances. It therefore falls to labour movement organizations – not least because of their considerable

resources and their continued ability to dislocate production – to move beyond simply defending their members’ immediate interests. They need to develop policies recognizing that the majority of society are undermined by the latest degeneration of a moribund capitalism that is wasting its human as well as its natural resources. Higher education and its important constituency of increasingly disillusioned students remains a critical space in which to generate such alternatives.

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