

Higher education: a complex microcosm of a complex society.

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***Abstract:** Participation in higher education is more diverse than ever before. Government intervention, market forces and new academics teaching new subjects to new students make it a more complex and diverse world than it used to be. However, these qualities should be viewed as positives rather than negatives: they make HE relevant to modern society, and less of an "Ivory Tower" than it has been at perhaps any time in its history. HE at the present moment is an exciting place to be.*

***Keywords:** agenda diversity, widening participation, commercialization of higher education.*

Introduction

Higher education (HE) has always been both a product of, and a participant in, the society it is a part of. From its beginnings, there has been change, diversity and disagreement; indeed, this tension is often seen as a driving force when we look back at the development of HE. There has always been input, frequently both financial and intellectual, from the establishment (whether in the form of wealthy individuals or, as is generally the case now, of governments), and this has often fuelled the changes taking place. Not everyone will agree with the motives that prompt the changes. A current major motivation for change is government desire to increase economic performance and this is rarely popular with academics. As we shall see, though, there is evidence to suggest that the actual outcome of government intervention is may be much more beneficent than is intended.

This economic agenda is not the only one driving change. Students too have agendas and, as the student body expands and diversifies, so does the range of motivations encompassed. University administrators need to keep their institutions financially solvent. Academics naturally have agendas for HE too, and we must also recognize that academics are a decreasingly homogenous group. However, it can be too easy to focus on the apparent conflict arising from this wide range of divergent opinions, and consequently overlook some simple, and encouraging, truths. HE has been evolving for centuries, often to cries of derision from contemporary observers, yet it has survived, prospered, and convinced each successive generation of its worth. An HE establishment that remains dedicated to producing a small number of traditional professionals is unlikely to achieve this today. HE today is now a very "big tent" indeed, and can accommodate a wide range of agendas. It is not inevitable that these agendas will lead to conflict; I believe we can show that they might all be satisfiable, and that the mixture enriches HE.

We need to examine the nature of current changes taking place within HE, and place them in the context of its continuing evolution, in order to evaluate them accurately. I think doing this will enable us to see that many of the things we tend to perceive a major changes are simply part of a continuous evolutionary process (and, conversely, that some aspects of HE we currently take completely for granted are relatively recent developments). We will then examine two of the greatest changes (the continuing shift of the economic burden from the state to the individual, and student diversity) in greater detail.

This paper concentrates most specifically on developments in Australia and the United Kingdom, though many of the changes, and pressures for change, are taking place in other countries too.

Historical context

In Britain, in 1901, the school leaving age was 13, though this was only effectively enforced by the Education Act of 1902. The rate of participation in HE was very low, with a small number of mainly well established universities serving a few thousand students throughout the country. Birmingham, the first of a new wave of "civic" universities, was granted its charter in 1901. During the first half of the century, the number of universities grew appreciably, but overall student numbers remained small: about 10,000 degrees were awarded in 1922, and about 20,000 in 1960.

The 1960s saw huge changes in higher education provision in the UK. The 1962 Education Act placed a duty on local authorities to make awards (covering both living costs and tuition fees) to students attending a fulltime first degree course. In 1963, the Robbins Report recommended the extension of Higher Education as a universal provision for all with the necessary ability. In 1966, the new generation of Polytechnics was established. Students numbers rose dramatically and have continued to do so: the number of degrees awarded rose to some 50,000 in 1970, and 90,000 in 1990 (Hicks 1999). State funding of HE peaked in this period, which is often categorised as a "golden age"; it has been in decline since 1974.

In Australia, the pattern has been similar. The general level of participation in education at the turn of the century was much as in the UK: primary school (for 6-13 year olds) was compulsory, but this was not strictly enforced, not available in isolated communities, and not applicable to indigenous peoples. There were 4 small universities (in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart), mainly teaching Arts and the professions, with a joint total of 33 professors and 2500 students, many part-time. Relatively few children proceeded beyond primary education even well into the century. In 1946, only 7 education beyond 15. Secondary schools charged fees in the 1930s, and these were not abolished until after the war.

During the war years, the Labor government introduced federal subsidies for disadvantaged students. Although this was primarily because of manpower issues, it was a big step forward, particularly because it represented initiative at federal rather than state level. The subsidies were continued after the war, but were only available to a very small group, so had little overall impact on HE, and attendance rates remained low.

The big change, when access to HE became far more universal, occurred as a result of reforms instituted by the Whitlam government of 1972 (see, for example, Weatherley (1992)).

However, the golden age in Australia was even shorter than in the UK. Whitlam's ALP government abolished university fees; Hawke's reintroduced them in 1987. Nonetheless, participation rates in higher education have continued to grow. Attendance rates increased 5fold from 1960 to 1999 (LSAY 2002); by 1990 23.4% increased to 34.4%

In both Australia and the UK, the success of getting more people into higher education has had the result of making it far more costly overall, and this in turn has led to more of the cost being passed on to the student. The Conservative British government of 1990 introduced student "top up loans" to counter the diminishing value of the maintenance grant, but stopped short of cutting the grant altogether or introducing tuition fees. In 1998, a flat rate tuition fee of 1,000 per year was introduced (by a Labour government, much to the disappointment of many of its supporters). Fees increased to 3000 in 2003; a graduate income tax is also likely as a further charge; grants have been abolished. The average UK graduate will soon expect to graduate with average debts of 15,000 according to most estimates (approximately \$A37,000) plus a increased tax liability expected to last for 25 years. In Australia, 2004 saw most universities announce large fee rises, in many cases the 25% Contribution Scheme that was the maximum allowed by the Higher Education Reform Act of December 2003.

To accommodate this increase in student numbers, universities have been encouraged to diversify in terms of subjects taught. Such new subjects as Media Studies have attracted a good deal of

opprobrium: the normally sympathetic Guardian newspaper has reported that "there are the apparent oxymorons turfgrass science, amenity horticulture, surf and beach management and the BSc from Luton University in decision-making, which begs the cheap but irresistible observation, how did those on the course manage to make the decision to take it in the first place?" (15/1/2003). At the same time, a number of traditional subjects have seen falling enrolments: chemistry is a good example of such a discipline in Britain. It should be noted, though, that this is not a new process. In 1901, chemistry was very much a new subject, and many universities regarded it as not entirely appropriate for degree level study.

In terms of participation, higher education has not suddenly changed after a long period of stability, and what I believe is the most significant change of all (the democratization of higher education, by making it universally accessible) actually occurred a number of years ago: the quantum leap in enrolments took place in the 1960s in Britain.

The commercialization of higher education

Free higher education for all existed for only a very short period (and even then, not everywhere: students in the USA have always paid for their degrees), and the current introduction of fees can be seen as a return to the norm. What is different now is that the fees are now paid not just by a wealthy few, who could largely afford them, but by a large group of people, most of whom cannot afford them. Many people now face a decision about whether going to university is worth it to them in financial terms.

Why should people go to University? Many governments have economic motives, and it is government that is driving the increase in enrolments, particularly in the UK.

In 2002, George Mason University (a fairly traditional state university in Virginia, USA) became so worried by this that it published the following statement:

"Corporate models" of education in which students are viewed as "customers" are not appropriate. Education is a unique activity in a democratic society that differs markedly from both business and government. Universities are absolutely essential in contemporary society as centres of free inquiry, free expression, open discovery, and dissent. Any attempt to force education into a corporatist mold devalues faculty, lowers academic standards, and harms both students and the institution itself. (GMU Faculty Senate, September 2002)

It is perhaps particularly interesting that this should have been published by a US university, given that there have not been such large changes in the funding model for US universities as for those in Australia and Britain, and where attitudes might thus be expected to have changed less. A member of the Engineering faculty conducted some research amongst students at GMU to see if the statement accorded with the perceptions of the students (Denning 2002). At first glance, the results are seem disappointing: Denning reports that ALL the students who gave their views rejected the Senate's claim that they were not customers, even while recognising that state subsidies meant they were not bearing the full cost of their education.

However, possibly the most interesting point revealed by Denning's research is that what the students really wanted control over was when they were able to pursue their studies, rather than the precise content of their courses. They felt that their customer status enabled them to say that they expected to have good access to their tutors, and for the university to timetable classes at times to suit them, rather than the other way around. If we want a wider range of people to be able to participate in higher education, and I believe most of us do, then this is surely a reasonable demand, particularly if most of our students need to work, or bring up children, or fulfil other obligations at the same time as studying.

I invited my own students to comment on the GMU statement. All my respondents have career expectations linked to their studies. Reassuringly, though, most also cited enjoyment of study as a motivator, and many made it plain that this was what they valued most. A typical comment is: "I for one am a mature student who appreciates the opportunity to study, despite the huge debt I've accumulated, and believe education should not become inaccessible (or more inaccessible). I enjoy studying and the opportunity to explore ideas it gives me". Such comments are not limited to UK students; a University of Queensland student sent me the following: "ROI should be a key factor when choosing a degree course, but not the sole reason. I think education and especially higher education forms the foundation for a better society".

Let us consider another statement of general educational goals. "We don't have to put up with the second-hand and second-rate ideas that are given to us, that we can get a different perspective by looking at the lives and thoughts of some great intellects from the past. Cultivating the intellect in this way is the essence of university study." This statement, (one I feel more than happy to agree with) is part of the Open University's mission statement. The Open University is Britain's only university entirely based on distance learning. It has a very "open access" admissions policy and attracts students from all ages and backgrounds. Currently, 150,000 undergraduates and 11,000 postgraduates (source: OU) make personal and financial sacrifices to study with the OU, and a large number of staff work as poorly paid tutors because they believe in what the Open University offers. If we do have concerns about the commercialization of higher education, perhaps we should ask if the fault lies as much with the universities as with the students. Universities in the UK now openly compete for students in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. At Westminster, we advertise in newspapers, even on the sides of buses and in trains. We send recruitment teams to increasingly farflung areas of the world, where we compete with other UK universities, Australian universities, US universities, and the rapidly expanding domestic higher education sectors of countries that formerly didn't have them. We run franchise operations in such diverse countries as Gambia and Uzbekistan. It is not surprising that, as we compete so vigorously for their tuition fees, students feel that conferring their financial benefits upon us should confer some benefits on them in return: we woo them as customers, and then seek to deny them their normal consumer rights.

Student diversity

Perhaps the main effect, for the universities, of the increase in numbers is the real growth in diversity this has brought about.

We are, of course, all aware that student diversity has increased over the last century, but not always how great the extent of the change really is. The effect has been most marked in the UK (because of immigration, Australia had a more ethnically diverse population throughout the period in question). In 1901, as we have seen, Britain had less than 10,000 students. Of these, the overwhelming majority were undergraduate, white, male, aged under 24, and drawn from the wealthiest sections of society. This group naturally shared many aspirations and assumptions. Since most academics were also drawn from much the same socioeconomic group, it's fair to assume that academic freedom did not necessarily mean that the mores of wealthy British society were much challenged within its universities.

Britain now has many more students (nearly two million in total), of course, but it is the way the group is made up that is really interesting. Some of the key changes are as follows. Twenty percent of students are now postgraduate. This group often has different expectations of study than undergraduates, so its greater prominence shifts the balance. Studies at Westminster have shown that postgraduate students are generally more interested in education for its own sake, and less motivated by employment aspirations.

The number of female students has changed particularly dramatically. In 1923, only 23% (only 91,922). In 2004, 54% (levels) are female.

A similarly dramatic shift has occurred in the numbers of part-time students. Australia has had a long history of part-time study, but it was much rarer in Britain. Now, nearly one third of undergraduates, and nearly two thirds of postgraduates, are part-time students. This has brought with it an aging of the student population (as one might expect in an aging society). Amongst fulltime students, 27% are aged over 20 and 45% majority of part-time students (85).

Finally, the number of overseas students has risen from 4 to nearly 13.

Some of these changes are a direct result of the pressures for change discussed above. For example, education in the early part of the twentieth century was usually funded by the parents of the student, and many families considered educating their daughters a waste of money (see Brittain (1933) for an autobiographical account of this phenomenon). Social evolution means it would now be ridiculous to regard women as less worth educating than men, while the shift in funding from the family to the student allows individuals to choose for themselves. In addition, the pursuit of cash by the universities has made them much more inclined to cater for the needs of part-time students, and the fact that postgraduate fees are higher than undergraduate has made the former an attractive group to universities.

The impact of these changes on higher education institutions

”The first purpose, therefore, of a university is to provide instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour.” ”There is a Knowledge which is desirable, though nothing comes of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour.” The first of these quotations seems, to me at least, dull, utilitarian and out of date, a very nineteenth century sentiment, whereas the second sums up how many academics feel about modern education. The second quote, in fact, really is nineteenth century (Newman, 1851), whereas the first is taken from the report (Robbins, 1963) that began the process of large-scale university expansion in the UK.

The environment in which we work as academics has indeed changed dramatically in recent years in terms of who our students are, and how their expectations have changed as their education has become something that they might have to make a considerable financial sacrifice for. To many, the changes are deeply worrying. Our institutions seem to be becoming businesses that must worry about profit and loss; our products are the degrees and certificates that we confer, and the students have become our customers. Furthermore, if we believe the doom mongers, we are peddling these products to people not really capable of appreciating them. Both these effects appear to be unavoidable consequences of government policy.

It is very difficult to measure what the economic consequences of wider access to HE, and greater student diversity, really are. There is not yet any well-established causal link between these and increased wealth. In Australia in particular, it was the increase in wealth that took place over the sixties that enabled Whitlam to reform HE; since then, Australia’s economic position in relation to the rest of the world has actually declined.

What is undisputedly happening is that society is becoming more educated, and the aspirations of its members are being changed. Not only do more women and members of ethnic minorities now participate in higher education, they now also occupy more managerial and professional positions than ever before. Education, it appears, gives people higher personal aspirations, and also furnishes the means with which to fulfil them.

In our modern complex world we need, particularly in democratic societies, citizens who can actively participate to make society work. There is some evidence that this is happening: levels of voter turnout in UK elections are currently very low (59% participation in so-called "single issue politics" (e.g., groups concerned with specific issues like the environment, local development, etc) has never been higher. Voters are not necessarily apathetic, simply more focussed, better informed about how to make a difference, and better able to use the tools of a modern, "information age" society. It appears that there is a relationship of mutual benefit between society and the world of HE. A more democratic society widens participation in education, which in turn produces further pressure for increased democratization.

Conclusions

It is only really possible to speculate about what the long term effects of the changes we have considered will be. Change and complexity in world markets makes economic forecasting more difficult than ever. The growth of India and China as world economic powers is likely to have far more effect on the economies of Australia and Britain than any educational policies instituted by their respective governments. The apparent conflict between the agendas of those who wish to use higher education to drive economic development and those with more traditionally liberal views is probably irrelevant: a better educated society is likely to be better able to adapt to changing a economic climate. As fewer people work in primary industries, it is quite possible that a more highly educated workforce will perform better in economic terms, but for different reasons than currently expected.

What we really lack, and what should be easier to achieve, is more information about how our students perceive their courses, what their agendas are, and how well they feel their studies served them in the years after they graduate. The discourse we have with our students has improved, but still has a long way to go.

Our starting point was that change is constant, so things will not remain exactly as they are now: some of the newest degree disciplines, for example, will probably not survive. Nevertheless, as we face what is widely predicted to be a difficult century (with problems like climate change, increased migration, economic realignment, and so forth all facing both Britain and Australia with rapidly increasing urgency) I can only feel hopeful that decisions will be made by a population that has been exposed to a process that still encourages independent and critical thought more widely than ever before. Perhaps a degree course in decision making is no bad thing after all.

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