CGHE Conference 1 March 2017

Opening statement—Simon Marginson

Colleagues let’s begin by congratulating Professor Claire Callender who yesterday was awarded an OBE at the Palace, in recognition of her contributions to higher education. It’s wonderful Claire!

Colleagues much has happened since the ESRC/HEFCE Centre for Global Higher Education’s founding conference at Senate House a year ago. Though most of the journey is still ahead, some distance has been covered. I want to thank Deputy Directors Claire Callender and William Locke, Centre Manager Carolyn Gallop, Communications Officer Anna Phillips, the Research Management Committee, all CGHE researchers, including our brilliant postdocs and doctoral students, CGHE’s Advisory Board and Associate Organisations, and our funders ESRC and HEFCE who have been a great strength. And David Guile, Becky Francis and Dame Nicola Brewer at UCL. And let me thank you all for joining CGHE today, at this fully booked meeting, including those watching the session on screen outside the hall. It’s great to feel the edge, the excitement in the air.

Colleagues, we meet at a crucial time for UK, Europe and higher education, in an extraordinary landscape in the Atlantic countries and Western Europe that no one saw coming a year ago. Matters are different in East and South East Asia and Latin America, where education and science are rising; and in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, which have more severe problems. But the big changes in this region affect politics, economics and cross-border flows elsewhere. And higher education and research are directly implicated. Higher education, science, experts, mobile foreigners, mobile locals: all are on the alt-right blacklist.

Remarkably, the toxic, unresolvable debate between global mobility and national mono-culture has not only paused the evolution of Europe, it is now more potent than the goal of economic prosperity, which a year ago ruled policy in the UK and US. We have long struggled with the domination of higher education policy by *solely* economic indicators. We now have a larger problem.

Ending free movement in Europe is now a higher priority for the UK government than either economic enrichment, or attracting global talent. The UK’s two most successful global sectors are financial services, and higher education and research. Different though they are, each is likely to be collateral damage of blood and soil nationalist politics. Nigel Farage even argues that in trade agreements, the UK should give priority to countries that speak English. That’s some export strategy. I doubt Germany is about to give priority to trading partners that speak German, or Finland to countries that speak Finnish!

And suddenly, higher education and research are negatively positioned in both UK and US. University cities in the Midlands and the North that voted Remain sit amid strong Leave majorities in the smaller towns and rural areas for whom global connectedness is not working. And a rogue alt-right US administration target both US universities and climate science. It is more dangerous in the US.

It all forces us to reconsider not just higher education, but our understandings of globalisation, society and politics. Even of determination in social science.

The change in Anglo-America-Europe intersects with a higher education sector already undergoing transformation. Three great tendencies have reshaped the sector in the last generation: massification, globalization and marketization. Across the world these tendencies impact the sector in varied ways.

*Marketization* has transformed the English-speaking HE systems, Russia and much of East Europe and India. It has had less impact in Western Europe and much of Latin America, has partly reversed in Poland, and been contained in China and East Asia. *Global convergence and integration* have built a world system of knowledge based on networked universities, a fundamental and decisive change, and there is a continuing secular expansion in mobility, despite increasing opposition to migration in some countries. But cross-border engagement is articulated through national settings. The impact of the global varies markedly by country, in higher education and most other spheres.

Of the three tendencies it is *massification*, linked to urbanisation and growing middle class, that is truly universal. In the last two decades the world Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio jumped from 17 to 34 per cent. More than fifty countries enrol half of each school leaver age cohort. Only in the US and UK are student numbers falling. Perhaps this is because in these highly stratified systems, in societies becoming more unequal, the social value of participation in bottom tier institutions is being emptied out, while private costs are rising. But overall, worldwide, the story is continuing and rapid enrolment growth.

So here’s the new paradox of high participation higher education. On one hand, HE has never been more central to economic, social and cultural life, never reached more people, never been more inclusive. On the other hand, it is painted as a rootless elite conspiracy. When Michael Gove said ‘people have had had enough of experts’, that resonated with many that had never entered a university. When Theresa May said ‘if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere’, we felt the hurt. As if people must choose between singular identities, national or global, and it is unnatural to be both.

I don’t think we yet fully understand *why* higher education is now so central, and higher education and globalisation so closely intertwined. Perhaps our inherited social science tools are inadequate to the task. Human capital theory embodies an important insight into the way that higher education builds human capacity and potential, yet only part of that is captured by measures of productivity based in the market value of graduate labour. Theories of credential signalling and positional competition also provide only part of the story. And all are essentially proxies—how higher education does it remains a black box.

Amartya Sen comes closer, with his focus on capability. Studies of teaching and learning that identify the effects of immersion in complex knowledge, like the CGHE study being conducted by Paul, Jenni, Jan and Janja, also point the way. The key, I think, and herein lies the lasting democratic potential of the sector, is higher education’s role in fostering *student agency*. Higher education changes people. It builds capacity and confidence so that graduates are less trapped by their personal circumstances. And as Sen notes, building agency has an associational dimension, as well as an individual dimension. Higher learning fosters collective social agency, and global agency. The Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities has called this year for a conference on ‘World-Class University: A global common good, and national contribution’.

Let me give you an illustration. Recently the OECD published *Perspectives on Global Development 2017: International migration in a shifting world*. It contains a table comparing the cross-border mobility of people with, and without, university degrees. Among those *without* university degrees, the tendency to move across borders is correlated to income. As you might expect, as income rises, people have more scope for mobility. The capacity for mobility is associated with economic advantage, and it furthers those individual advantages. The wealthy benefit most from globalisation. End of story.

No, it isn’t. Among those with university degrees—and current participation rates suggest this will soon be one fifth of all people in the world—the pattern is different. First, at a given level of income, those with degrees are *much* more mobile than those without degrees. In other words, higher education helps to democratise mobility—though only provided you can get to higher education in the first place! Second, for those with degrees, as income rises, once a modest threshold of income is reached, there is little change in potential mobility. My conclusion is that higher education not only helps graduate achieve greater personal agency, it actually reduces the effects of economic determination in their lives. Whoaahh! Education *in itself* brings graduates greater freedom. An effect not captured in graduate salaries and employment rates, but profoundly important. This is what I meant about rethinking our core assumptions.

This conjunction of higher education, mobility and agency freedom also helps to explain why educated persons and experts, and mobile and cosmopolitan persons, are joint targets of the alt-right. Though economic inequality and social closure have provided fertile conditions for the backlash, the political polarisations engineered by UKIP and by Donald Trump do not turn on income or class. There are poor and wealthy on both sides of the divide. Those political polarisations turn on culture, and higher education is part of the cultural mix.

We gain some sense of this from the voting patterns in the June referendum on Brexit and the November American election. A word of caution. Binary voting calls up heterogeneous voting blocs. By no means all Brexit supporters were persuaded by alt-right arguments. Some were left of centre, including many in Labour Party branches. In the US Trump drew the votes of many lifelong Republicans who support the party of Lincoln. The polarisation also partly differed between US and UK with ethnicity (‘race’) and gender playing a larger role in the US. But the momentum of both Brexit and Trump was driven by the alt-right, inescapably, and there was convergence in the arguments, particularly on migration, national identity and the negative referencing of ‘experts’.

The best overall predictors of how people voted were (1) whether they lived in large cities, where they voted Remain and Clinton, or small towns and rural areas, where they strongly supported Leave and Trump; and (2) whether they had a degree. Degree holders concentrate in cities. In the UK just 26 per cent of degree holders voted Leave, but 78 per cent of people without qualifications. Young people, the most educated generation in UK history, overwhelmingly voted Remain. In the US Trump celebrated the ‘uneducated’ and secured a sharp swing among those who had never attended college. Clinton secured more than half the vote from only one group of white voters: college educated women.

It is ironic, isn’t it? Once higher participation higher education, and also climate science, become more central, they can be used to polarise an electorate on the basis of identity. You can’t divide an electorate this way when only 5 per cent of people go to university. But while mass higher education is more politically vulnerable there is a positive side. Because higher education changes people; because graduates have a greater capacity to manage difference, change and complexity, and are more comfortable with mobility and plural cultures; the continuing spread of higher education cuts the ground from under the alt-right. Provided that higher education is sufficiently equitable to continue attract first generation students, and sufficiently attuned to the communities in which universities and colleges are nested. In countries where market forces have let rip, we need to moderate stratification, strengthen the quality and standing of mass institutions, and focus on public goods as well as private benefits of higher education. Undue emphasis on private goods, and on selective HEIs inaccessible to the average family, means higher education is more readily isolated.

These are the larger issues underlying CGHE’s 15 research projects, being pursued by 40 researchers in five UK and eight international universities. CGHE was created to be the eye of the storm, as a research-based reflexive capacity in UK higher education and higher education policy. In establishing CGHE, ESRC and HEFCE saw the need for that reflexive capacity to operate on a global scale and a globally collaborative basis, so that HE could be seen from outside the UK as well as within, while remaining rooted in the UK. This perspective is diametrically opposed to the nation-bounded, blood and soil vision of UKIP and Trump.

But the healthy development of UK higher education is also central to CGHE, meaning HE in the context of Brexit. We have sought ESRC funding to study the consequences and potentials of Brexit for UK institutions, including their strategic capacity in a fast-changing setting characterised by multiple possibilities, sudden shocks and problems of staffing and financial sustainability. We have also begun a small network project bringing researchers of higher education in Europe together to explore the Brexit environment as it affects European higher education as well as higher education in the UK.

Since the last public conference we have opened our centre premises in the UCL Institute of Education building in Bedford Way, started six researchers, and kick-started most CGHE projects, mainly in the second half of 2016. Lancaster and Sheffield held their first CGHE events, and our international partners in Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Hong Kong SAR, Japan and China started work. A dozen *CGHE Working Papers* were released and we mounted 35 public seminars, including large gatherings on the REF, and higher education and the media. Our researchers produced many blogs and were media active, especially in the *Times Higher Education*. We sincerely thank John Gill and his team.

This year we broaden the CGHE agenda in several ways. In association with the British Council we have started work in India, and are soon to go to Mexico and Chile. We have begun a 2 to 4 page *CGHE Policy Briefs* series that we hope will augment our impact and provide a medium for disseminating project outcomes. May, with funding from Lancaster University, will see the first CGHE ‘key debate in higher education’, with the title ‘What is “global” about global higher education?’ In June, with funding from UCL IOE, we hold a Summer School for CGHE postdocs and doctoral students, including overseas-based researchers.

Today’s conference has three purposes. First, to discuss themes and events in worldwide higher education, including keynotes from Lorraine Dearden and Jenni Case this morning, and the panel session on Brexit, Europe and UK at 12.

Second, to present first findings from our research. Most projects are three or four years. The main outputs, and their impact fall, in the second half of projects. Nevertheless, today we release early findings from five CGHE projects, including research on the graduate labour market—in the third conference keynote by Francis Green, this afternoon—and studies of cooperation between UK HE and industry, higher education governance in the UK and Europe, the parameters of student loans policy, and on the long-term relation between macro-economic changes and higher education funding and participation. Most of these early project findings will be presented in parallel sessions after lunch.

The third purpose of the conference is to hear from you. Today will be a success to the extent you are involved, not only those in the hall but those accessing the conference through the live-stream. Respond to the papers, give us your take on the key issues, and tell us what CGHE should or could do. After the conference the papers and slides will be available on the CGHE website, and we hope to see and hear you again, in CGHE seminars and other activities. Again, thank you for coming. We look forward to a fascinating day, one that will take us all forward.