

Becoming and belonging in higher education: What does the future hold and how can we make it our future?

Simon Marginson / University of Oxford
Imperial 18 May 2022

[title slide: Becoming and belonging in higher education]

It's good to see everyone here. Since March 2020 this is the first time I have been on a London university site, and the first time I have spoken to a live participant audience anywhere outside the classroom, though I've been teaching live and in masks since last October. It's been a weird more than two years for all of us. The weirdness has fallen unevenly. Some have had huge spikes in workload, debilitating illness or the loss of family members. Others liked the no commuting, the efficiency and flexibility of Zoom and more time with family. Disruptions to international travel affected some more than others. Aside from those who lost family to the virus, I feel sorriest for graduate students. I really like teaching in our Department, we have great one-year Masters students, motivated and smart; but none of our 2020-21 students ever saw a classroom or met most of their cohort, except electronically. And it mattered. It was not what they signed up for. I'm not talking about the 'consumer experience', the bad 'value for money', I'm talking about the bad human experience and the lost personal growth. The online only education was cognitively strong but it was only half a university education. It's been great to see the classroom, the coffee shop and the easy friendships come back for the 2021-22 cohort.

[Traditional higher education is dying??]

Many stupid things were said about universities from on high during the pandemic. I'm not talking about Westminster. It would take more than the hour we have together today to list all of those foolish things! I'm talking about the hopeful statements made by consultants and analysts of higher education that COVID-19 would trigger a permanent shift from institution-based face to face teaching to a largely online model that would be more business friendly, efficient (meaning cheaper), and above all commodifiable. Higher education by technical support and AI, and much less academics. And, presumably, much of the inner-city real estate handed to developers. We were told that this was the modern way, and the classroom and the on-site laboratory were not. That this was what students wanted, and the pandemic would accelerate the inevitable change.

[Most Students really wanted to get back to classes]

Well, it wasn't what students wanted. We have made online education much better than before, but for every student who wants to avoid the large intimidating institution, or prefers the ease of time use, there's several more want the human contact with their

teachers and each other. It's not just about parties. Students learn both singly and through sociability, through conversation and shared reflexivity, in the university as a whole other world, which begins for them as strange and new, until bit by bit they make into their world. The excitement when classes reopened was the proof of the point. It vindicated the traditional people-based model of university. This was the upside of the pandemic. There's a lesson here, about how we approach higher education in the next period. Face to face has a compelling educational power and face to face is what most students want.

[Patterns and predictions only work within closed systems: the world is an open system]

What else must we look out for in the next period? The sub-title of this talk is 'What does the future hold?' Let me state right now that I don't have all the answers to that question. No one does, whatever they tell you. I am a social scientist, and one of the conceits of social science, one of the ways we sell ourselves to government and public, is that we can predict the future. But patterns and predictions can only work within closed systems. The present reality of higher education, which includes both its actuality and its possibilities, constitutes an open system, and one that is constantly moving, evolving, as Heraclitus of Ephesus said.

[Heraclitus of Ephesus (544-484 BCE)]

Heraclitus was born in the sixth century BCE, about the time of Confucius in China and the Buddha in India, in the incredible Axial age when so many of today's ideas emerged. He was born to be the ruler of the city but he gave that up for philosophy. We don't know enough about Heraclitus. We don't know what he looked like. This bronze bust dates from 1900 CE. His book *On Nature*, the first book in the Greek tradition that was often cited by later philosophers, is lost.

['All things are in flux, like a river . . . Everything flows']

What has survived from Heraclitus is fragments, aphorisms collected and recorded by his followers. Yet these suggest a coherent ontology. Heraclitus exploded the idea of fixed reality and fixed truth. 'We cannot step twice in the same river', he said. 'Everything is in flux, everything flows'. The waters are always moving, there is always something new, everything is always becoming. So we cannot truly know the future. It is unforeseen. Be prepared for surprises, like war in Ukraine, or a global pandemic. 'Whoever cannot seek the unforeseen, sees nothing. The known way is an impasse.'

[The next phase of higher education]

So we cannot *know* the future and must open ourselves to surprises. All the same, we have agency – that was another Heraclitus message, and a message of Buddha and Confucius. We know the past, and can see something of what's coming, from different directions. The future will not *reproduce* the past, but the past is part of the future. So I think we can say with tentative and partial confidence three things about the next phase of higher education.

[Growing impact of geo-politics]

The first thing we can say is that the world is not sleepy hollow and that because it is now central to society, higher education will continue to be zinged by geo-politics. We have some autonomy as a sector, yet we are also connected with the nation and the world at many points. All the big changes impinge on us, and in some, universities and science are protagonists, or in the gun. Science is quintessentially global. Major geo-political changes have accumulated in the last six years. Mostly Heraclitan: unexpected and destabilising.

Brexit stopped the entry of many European students, ended much research cooperation and truncated the slow formation of a regional European identity in UK, a process in which the universities were playing a leading role. The US determination to retain global supremacy vis a vis has China has triggered a new era securitisation in science and technology which is significantly reducing collaboration between China and the West. US-China co-publication in 2020 was overwhelmingly the most important nation-to-nation collaboration in world science. That productive and happy arrangement is eroding. US securitisation plays out in visa restrictions, suspicion towards faculty with joint appointments in China and the US, attacks on academics who return to China through the 1000 talents programme. Brain drain out of China is OK, brain circulation is no longer welcome. What will happen in UK? I think UK-China relations are also affected. We already have something of a US/China Cold War and America's allies are being called in. In the other Cold War, Russia, after two decades of struggling to kick-start internationalised universities with world-ranked science, has junked this policy. Its catastrophic militarism, and the shut down of freedoms and international links in its universities, have taken it out of cross-border relations in higher education, perhaps for decades. At the same time, much of Ukraine's higher education has stopped. Ukraine's population is two thirds that of the UK. It has a large higher education system.

Nativist politics, intrinsically in tension with international connections and readily mobilised against universities and science, have major influence in the US, UK, India, Russia, Brazil and parts of Europe. There are more shifts and shocks to come. We can expect a tremendous existential struggle over climate science, as campaigns to stop fossil fuel companies gather momentum. Those companies have deep pockets and will roll out their formidable capacity to shape media, social media and government, targeting individual scientists, attacking them to discredit their work, and attacking universities such as Imperial that house them.

[The slow drip that wears away the stone]

The second thing about the future we can say with reasonable confidence is that the slow tightening of resources and time use will continue, the slow drip that eventually wears away the stone. Tuition-based per student funding is falling annually in real terms. There will be less research funding from Europe. Compensation by national science funding will not be enough, and it will not replicate the mix of disciplines as they were funded by Europe. In most departments, workloads will grow, many classes will expand, not all vacancies will be

filled and many new staff will face questionable conditions. Casualisation and precarity will expand across the academic and professional staff. More and more high achieving graduates will be driven from university careers. Some folk are so dedicated to the life of the mind they will hang in, working for an opening, but housing costs are high, many people have families, and they can take their energy and talents elsewhere. The slow drip does not stop universities being universities but it unnecessarily limits what they can do.

[In English higher education the funding of public good is pushed to the margins]

We need a new government policy, that will increase public funding to support the contribution of universities to the public good. This is little funded in England, unlike most other countries, because policy economics is entrenched in high capitalism. The market is seen as the foundation of material and moral value and public good is positioned at the margins of. Unpaid tuition loans are funded, but that is a subsidy for individuals, not for the collective benefit. In most courses there is no up front public funding at all. The public goods that the UK funds are individual opportunity, through the loans system, and research. But if direct public funding for learning is not increased, the British higher education system, which flourished in the early years after the 2012 reforms because of the hike in tuition, while at the same time also being strengthened by Europe, will continue to be slowly eroded.

[Are we forever stuck with the market model of higher education?]

Speaking of the under-funding of the public good, the third thing we can say confidently about the next phase is that we'll still have the market model of higher education in England. The Tories love it, and most brands of Labour government are likely to leave it intact. This is the cross we have to bear, we live in a country that in ideological terms is the heartland of liberal capitalism, as I've said, but it is a heavy load. Higher education is unsuited to business models. In the market vision universities compete for consumer students, who choose between the products on offer on the basis of the quality of teaching and the employability of graduates. This is a fantasy, a caricature of the relation between students and their higher education, but it is an officially sanctioned fantasy. The media buys it, and we are meant to do it.

One of the market indicators, comparative teaching quality, has fizzled. The TEF, which would have done good if it lifted student learning, offered no comparative measures of education. No one thinks that the student satisfaction and graduate salary data were about teaching quality. But anyway, the bulk of research on student choice finds the prestige of universities is a much more important determinant than reputation for teaching.

[Employability']

That leaves 'employability' and the use of short-term graduate salary data to rate courses and institutions. This is another matter. It is the heart of the sector's current problems in the

policy and public space. Employability is a gift to government that doesn't like or trust universities. It is an unsolvable problem for us and a never ending justification for them to dumb down higher education and reduce the obligations of policy. Data on 'value for money' based on earnings, and tables of 'low value' universities and disciplines, allow government to slash funding, undermine less prestigious universities, and push would-be first generation higher education students away from higher education to further education - while keeping higher education for the middle class and holding down the participation rate. It protects the stubbornly persistent UK class system, while somehow making knowledge and personal development, which are all that we do, irrelevant to students and to us. All that matters is money in the bank. And, says the employability mantra, if you don't have money in the bank it's the fault of your university, which miseducated and misled you.

[Employability' is a trap. Higher education is made responsible but cannot control graduate outcomes]

But are graduate earnings determined by universities? This is where 'employability' in the policy sense is vacuous. Higher education is only one of the factors that shapes graduate outcomes and is not the most important. Graduate job opportunities are affected by labour market fluctuations and regional economic factors. Social outcomes from education are strongly affected by starting inequalities between families, and by social networks after graduation, which are also shaped by families and the schools that some families buy. For example, two UK universities provide an identical educational experience. The graduates of one earn twice as much as the other. The high earners are from powerful families living in Kensington and Chelsea, and the low earners from a Northern town hard hit by recession. What does the comparison between the universities tell us about the quality of the education received, or the priority given to inculcating job search skills? *Nothing*. There's no causal relationship. But universities and courses are ranked in the market as if there is.

We want all our students to do well in life, just as students do themselves. Our programmes build their capacity to survive, cope and flourish. Many of us constantly help individual graduates to secure jobs and careers. Yet if we step out of line on the employability rhetoric it's easily painted as universities not caring about students, or jobs. Employment of graduates is what we want but 'employability' as defined in the political and public space is a trap. We have to fight our way out. I think universities as institutions, and their organisations, should confront the employability mantra, deny the causal responsibility that it has assigned to higher education – we don't create jobs! - and argue strongly that the value of higher education for students and society includes the fact that graduates contribute to every part of the economy, but is much larger than the employability mantra says.

[Developing a more positive understanding of higher education]

As I see it we need to seize the higher education narrative, articulating the positive role of higher education, including with that a more sophisticated take on higher education and

labour markets. I am convinced that the key to developing a positive understanding of higher education is to identify the core activity of the sector – what it does for students and society.

[Outcomes of higher education]

Higher education generates two kinds of outcomes. The first, the *direct effects* of higher education, are the most important. These are (1) the *education* of students, which I will expand on in a moment; and (2) the production, communication, reproduction and transmission of *knowledge* through research, scholarship and teaching. When higher education is adequately resourced it should be fully accountable for delivering on these outcomes. Our contributions to education and knowledge are also foundational to most of the other outcomes, the *indirect outcomes* where higher education connects to society. Therefore attempts to improve higher education should be focused mainly on the direct outcomes. I'll now say a bit more about both the direct and the indirect outcomes.

[Higher education as student self-formation: more authentic student-centredness]

Let's start with education. In the market model, one element that touches a chord with students is the student centredness, the promise of greater power. This promise is illusory. Consumers of higher education have little power. They cannot know what they are choosing unless they have actively experienced it; and if they vote with their feet and walk away from the course or the university, there's another student waiting to take their place. Most universities set out to fill a limited number of places. They are not trying to maximise sales.

Though market power is an illusion, student centredness is not. It is key to strengthening the education function. I have argued elsewhere, and in a paper currently under review, that we can understand higher education as a process of *self-formation* by students *immersed in knowledge*. This concept positions the student at the centre of the learning process, joined to the crucial role of the teacher, who understands the knowledge.

Higher education as self-formation rests on the fact that only the student does the actual learning. The learner is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled, the learner is a person with a will, a *drive* to learn, agency. At the same time the relation between student agency and higher education is reciprocal. The most important outcome of higher education is that it fosters and expands reflexive student agency. We know that this has lifelong benefits, *much* more important than the salary the graduate earns in the first two years after graduation.

[Student self-formation]

Higher education as self-formation is both an ideal to be achieved and a framework for understanding practice. The essential elements of higher education as self-formation, which are integrated with each other, are the autonomy of the learner, the will to learn, reflexive agency, and immersion in knowledge. Successful self-formation in higher education is

challenging and protracted. Perhaps some doctoral students, who engage closely in their own mentality, take it further than others. For anyone, autonomous agency and reflexivity entail hard transformative work, the ‘work of the self on the self’ as Michel Foucault put it. What distinguishes higher education from other kinds of personal formation is that the work passes through immersion in knowledge. Knowledge entails values as well as cognition and technique. This underpins the social contribution of the sector. Far from being a retreat from ‘the real world’, knowledge is the medium that most directly engages students in social relations during their studies and they take it into their careers. Self-formation through immersion in knowledge is also social formation.

[Antecedents of reflexive agency in higher education]

The idea of self-formation has roots in the psychology of self-determination, Ryan and Deci, and by Albert Bandura’s work on agency and reflexive self-consciousness. As a broad process of autonomous learning and self-development it has many pedagogical antecedents, from Confucian self-cultivation to *Bildung* in Germany, J.H. Newman, and John Dewey and C.P. Mead in the US. Arguably, however, these pedagogical antecedents of self-formation place insufficient emphasis on the *self-directed* character of the autonomous learner and leave the door open to older ideas of higher education as pedagogical other-formation. They also include a doctrinal element in curricula: the student is to be moulded on the basis of a fixed view of society. Here the autonomous student is turned into an object rather than a subject, which lessens the scope for creative reflexivity. In contrast, higher education as self-formation implies that students determine their own beliefs. Students need teachers, and a curriculum. Yet students in higher education are also adults with a will. They are not educational objects but subjects. They will make the world as they wish.

[Number of science papers in Scopus (NSF 2022), by type of collaboration, world: 1996-2020]

I won’t say much about research today, though my current studies are of global science. Research is easier to explain to external audiences than is teaching and learning. In some disciplines, at least, the case for research as a public good is readily made. One aspect of research is often overlooked when we talk about its contribution to society. Science is one of the most globalised of all human activities. It is not universal. The recognised global pool of knowledge is confined to English language publishing and excludes non-Western kinds of knowledge.

[Internationally collaborative papers 2016-19]

Nevertheless, with a quarter of all articles authored from more than one country, research plays a crucial role in fostering collaborative international relations in a world of difference. At Imperial in 2016-2019, no less than 70.6 per cent of all published papers had international co-authors. It is normal business, yes, it is now the way science is done, but it

has major consequences in shaping human society. now and in the future. International relations are one of the most important indirect outcomes of higher education.

[Shared outcomes, shared responsibility]

The indirect outcomes of higher education, which are many, are mediated effects, produced in the interaction between higher education and other sectors. The indirect outcomes include the formation of active political citizens, and the contributions we make to the dissemination of advanced literacy and technologies, public health awareness, social tolerance, cross-cultural capabilities, better international understanding, and so on. There is now considerable research evidence on the indirect contributions of higher education in different domains. Importantly, the indirect outcomes of education and knowledge building include the advanced skilled labour (the mix of knowledge and capability that economists define as employable 'human capital'), and in association with this, the shared contribution we make to reproducing and developing all the professions and many other occupations.

We should never stop repeating the point that our contribution to graduate work depends also on other parties, on the professions and the thousands of employers, large and small. The passage from higher education to employment is neither simple nor easy. These are different worlds. The transition is challenging. The key to optimising that transition is to build successful relations between higher education institutions and the professions and organisations that employ graduates. That's also the message about 'employability' we should take into that debate in the public arena. Shared responsibility.

[Inequalities are deep-seated and cannot be overcome by higher education alone. They need a whole of society approach]

Higher education also provides a social system for allocating opportunities and credentials across the population. Much depends on the extent to which this system is open and fair. But here again, we cannot wholly control the pattern of social outcomes through our own efforts. It is a conceit to believe that we can. Social, economic and racial inequalities are deeply embedded in the UK. They are fostered by the distribution of land and wealth, wage determination, career structures, hiring practices, closed social networks, a grossly unequal school system, the workings of the legal system and the media and many other factors. Higher education is only one factor in inequality and not the most important. And prior inequality closely affects the workings of higher education itself. Yet in the public space, universities are held solely responsible for their own social composition, as if they could freely rework themselves so as to exactly reflect the balance of family income deciles and the ethnic mix. If it was so easy to do it we would have done it long ago.

Don't get me wrong. As the webinar programme of my research centre shows, I am actively committed to widening participation, especially the hard-edged reforms that make a real difference to who gets into elite universities - funded foundation years and contextual

admissions – and to reforms that strengthen the lower and middle tiers of the system and reduce the stakes in competition between universities. The point I am making again is that inequality and access are a shared responsibility, not a matter just for universities. Necessarily, university reform must be joined to reform in schooling, incomes and tax/spend, if universities are to become more equal, and instruments for creating equality.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by summarising what I have said today:

1. The pandemic deeply confirmed the value of on-site learning and human relations in higher education.
2. We cannot know or predict the future in universities.
3. However, we can be reasonably sure that geo-politics will disrupt higher education and science to some degree, placing university autonomy and academic freedom under pressure, in the UK and many other countries.
4. Resources will become tighter in UK universities.
5. We will continue to be plagued by myths, that higher education determines graduate employment, and determines social equity in the sector. We need to emphasise shared social responsibility for both these outcomes.
6. Our positive vision of higher education should be grounded in the core activities for which we do carry sole responsibility and are accountable: the education function, and the production and communication of knowledge.
7. We can rework learning and teaching using the student-centred lens of higher education as self-formation through immersion in knowledge. This suggests a strong focus on building reflexive student agency.
8. Education and knowledge are the foundation of higher education's many indirect contributions, including preparation for work and careers. Higher education generates indirect outcomes in partnership with other organisations, including employers and professions. This shared responsibility must be made clear to all, but it is a good story to tell – everyone supports social engagement and partnership.