What should higher education be doing in a changing environment?

A presentation for the Higher Education Futures Conference: deciding a route and role for your institution. A diverse future? Time for Choices
Neil Stewart and Associates  Wednesday 23 June 2010, Bloomsbury Hotel London WC1

OK, so we almost know how bad the spending cuts are going to be, and we await the Browne review with bated breath. We live in turbulent times.

So what should higher education do? The agenda for today includes higher fees and student support, quality and standards, the student experience, research and global competitiveness, and skills for economic growth. I want to talk about those issues, but also about the values that lie behind them, and the emotions that affect how we cope with cuts and uncertainty. We need a balanced debate which recognises the importance of emotions and values. I’m going to use the Government priorities - Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility – to help define some of the questions we need to ask ourselves and others.

PPT “We have involved ourselves in a colossal muddle, having blundered in the control of a delicate machine, the working of which we do not understand.”
John Maynard Keynes

That was true in 1929, and again in 2009. We have to stop it coming true for higher education too.

I’m going to draw on the work of the International Futures Forum and its Director Graham Leicester, who wrote a pamphlet just after the credit crunch and the financial crisis called Beyond Survival.

Leicester says that applying conventional wisdom in uncertain times often leads to defensiveness, destructiveness and despair. Faced with a threat, our emotions can shut down our critical faculties. But there is another possibility, and that is growth and transformation through learning. To find that path we have to take a wider view, so that we can re-perceive how things are, and how they might be. There are four steps to learning, says Leicester: PPT Survival; Insight, Perseverance; and Hope. I’ll say more about each of those in a moment.

PPT “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards”.
Kierkegaard

“there are many pasts”
Don Michael

What this says is that even trying to make sense of life by looking backwards is highly selective. We might say that the current financial crisis is the worst for 80 years, and the structural deficit must be reduced. We might equally say that the level of national debt is only a quarter of what it was as a share of GDP when we created the welfare state. Last year the political narrative was about reform and regulation of the banking sector and its bonuses. Those issues have receded, and now it is not bankers’ bonuses but public services which are in the front line.
The dominant narrative frames what people believe and how they behave. In the West the narrative dictates public spending cuts, but there is no agreement on the details. Some Governments are increasing spending on higher education in a Keynesian counter-cyclical strategy. So the narrative leaves important things ambiguous or unspecified. It is also ephemeral - it might soon be superseded as market confidence and economic growth return.

The danger is that we will make choices for higher education without thinking beyond today’s dominant but ephemeral narrative. The choices we make should reflect our values and beliefs about the long-term purposes of higher education. We have great uncertainty, but as Mark Twain said: “When in doubt, do the right thing”. Futurology tells us that in an uncertain world you must be clear about your values and beliefs. One of our core beliefs is probably the desirability of diversity, so it might be difficult to find common ground, but I’ll try.

PPT HEFCE Chief Executive Alan Langlands told UUK in March that these are the crunch issues:

- Teaching first or research first?
- Protect core R and T or accept diminution to broaden HE mission?
- Protect the unit of funding for teaching, or spend less per student to provide places for more students?
- Industry-funded skills development or publicly-subsidised skills development?

Different institutions will make different choices. But no-one should choose without a clear idea about values and purposes. And we can’t have a sensible discussion without acknowledging that we may have bigger worries, like the survival of our institutions. So let’s go back to Graham Leicester’s four steps to take us Beyond Survival.

Short term survival is being framed inside institutions as a matter of income generation, efficiency gains and restructuring. In the longer term it’s framed as protecting higher education funding, probably through higher fees. If there is a shift towards more private funding we should expect greater accountability to students, but we should also expect more freedom from regulation as part of the deal. Higher fees also raise issues of fairness. Fairness is rightly presented as an issue of access for underprivileged groups, but we need to confront some uncomfortable facts: our system of student support is already 25% more expensive than the OECD average. And higher education spending is socially regressive. To justify that we need to focus less on the graduate premium and more on the wider social benefits of higher education.

Unfortunately the big issue for politicians has been individual benefits and the small number of working class people admitted to elite universities. That mindset devalues the good educational experience which many more students from under-represented groups get in the rest of higher education. So the obsession with the elite is itself unfair. The most effective way to widen access is to expand the system. Standing still or contracting would damage participation and be very unfair. To exercise responsibility Government and institutions must take a broader view of the higher education system as a whole. This is perhaps what David Willets meant in his Oxford Brookes speech about external London University-style expansion of higher education.

So we must think differently about the whole of higher education, including HE in FE, if we want to be fair and responsible. As part of this rethinking, we must recognise that the first
rule for survival is: “abandon the hope of rescue”. We shouldn’t do what is called ‘bending the map’ – imposing existing patterns on new information. We need to keep our emotions and reason in balance so that we can make new sense of our situation.

For that we need Insight. In particular, we need to be prepared for unpredictable, disruptive change. Salvation will not be found in a strategic plan with seven major priorities, 16 key performance indicators tuned to league table position, and action plans for every department cascading from the strategic priorities. Those things might be necessary, but what comes first is a clear sense of direction. And what comes second is acceptance that we are unlikely to end up where we aim for.

In turbulent times some people batten down the hatches, opting for no change. Others innovate for first order change within the existing framework. We also need second order change, from people ready to invest in the future rather than recreate the past. Our pioneering should be guided by our own insight into what freedom, fairness and responsibility should mean, for the kind of higher education system we believe in.

**PPT** For insight I draw on a multidisciplinary research programme started in 2002 by Howard Gardner at Harvard and colleagues at Stanford and Claremont, called *The Project on Good Work*.

“interested in individuals and institutions that look beyond the immediate bottom line; and in particular in those individuals and institutions that are aware of moral and ethical boundaries – the proper lines – that they are not willing to cross, even when such crossing might be legally sanctioned, expedient, and financially advantageous.”

Good Work is not just about excellence, it is equally about ethics. Perhaps we can agree on the need to encourage Good Work in these terms. And perhaps we can also agree on a common interest in the free exploration of ideas, the pursuit of knowledge, the intellectual and human development of the individual, and economic and social development through higher education. Doing the right thing is not just about excellence, world-class research, and improving the skills base for global competitiveness. It’s also about the ethics and the consequences of doing those things. How ethical and fair are our policies for international staff and student recruitment? If UK universities strip developing countries of their best academic talent, is that responsible behaviour by global universities? We need to reflect on questions like these, if we want to emerge from the cuts with our credibility intact.

So how do we promote Good Work in higher education over the next five years? As well as insight we need Perseverance. Elsewhere in the higher education world there are other narratives and other priorities.

**PPT** Simon Marginson at Melbourne has identified what he calls five new global tensions:
- Global and national perspectives
- Elite research and mass teaching
- Sameness and diversity
- East and West (rapid expansion and confidence in the developing East, cuts and uncertainty in the West)
- Insiders and outsiders (for example, in debates about elite research-intensive universities the whole of Africa might easily be excluded)
These are tensions, not mutually exclusive choices, and offer us a spectrum on which to locate our own institutions. Many will want to be somewhere near the middle, balancing these tensions. Most universities want to be global and national and local. We teach large numbers of students and we claim to do world class research. We say that British higher education has the same high standards for first degrees across the sector, while at the same time proclaiming the sector’s diversity. And we bridge East and West through global partnerships and overseas campuses. Wherever we position ourselves we need to persevere with that choice.

And for perseverance we also need Hope. Jonathan Lear at Chicago has a 2006 book called Radical hope: ethics in the face of cultural devastation. It analyses how the leaders of the Crow Nation of native Americans coped with the collapse of their culture and their confinement to reservations, by staying true to their values and reimagining their future. Higher education may or may not be in such a dire situation, but we must recognise that our values will be tested when our way of life is threatened. Where do we find our ‘moral compass’, and what should we call it now that Gordon Brown has gone?

In responding to our current challenge too many people in higher education have resorted to scaremongering and special pleading. Just look at Michael Arthur’s extraordinary statements on behalf of the Russell Group, special-pleading that the country can only afford 25 research-intensive universities, and then saying the end of civilisation is nigh unless we protect them.

We need to find the kind of radical hope that Lear talks about, to keep up with changing circumstances, and to keep our academic and intellectual culture alive. In facing uncertainty we need to use the kind of academic analysis we apply within our disciplines, but rarely to ourselves. We need to see the big issues from a broader perspective.

We have some good examples to follow. PPT In the fees debate Nick Barr at LSE has re-perceived student loans: he says loan repayment is not debt, it’s more like income tax or national insurance. The NUS has also engaged responsibly with the debate with its position on graduate contributions.

The debate about quality and standards has been distorted by tabloid journalism and populist politics, for example in last year’s Select Committee Report. QAA has been forced to steer a course between the various expectations of all the stakeholders in a way which Roger Brown (2010:136) recently described as “limited, incremental and frankly muddled”. To re-perceive these problems we should argue for more freedom from regulation, a ‘trust dividend’ from reductions in public spending. For government to spend less and at the same time to increase regulation is not fair, and it diminishes freedom and responsibility in higher education.

In terms of research, we need to go beyond arguments about concentration and protecting our world class science base, which is code for no change among the elite. Our diverse sector preserves its ‘narrow reputational range’ partly by recognising that excellent research can go on in many places. Research protects intellectual vitality and provides a crucial part of the psychological contract for many staff. The elite lobby is unfair and irresponsible if it ignores those issues.

In terms of skills and global competitiveness the narrative oversimplifies what higher education can do. Linear attempts at skills development often fail, as with the training of
doctors, teachers and nurses. On the other hand, a higher education sector free to develop courses it values which students want, will meet skill needs not even imagined when the courses were developed. Website design is the classic recent example. So we don’t just need freedom to do blue skies research, we need freedom for blue skies course development too. But too many people in higher education play to the gallery, and the gallery thinks the Leitch Report demands a blueprint for teaching, so we can engineer graduates to fit the needs of the future economy.

Not so. What the higher education sector can do, given the freedom to respond to academic and student demand, is prepare a mass student population for the uncertain needs of the future economy. But we collude in sustaining a narrative in which it is OK to debate research assessment and the iniquity of impact measures, but somehow not OK to object to endless performance measurement, quality audits, and student satisfaction surveys which imply that teaching is a routine activity with programmable results, while research is the opposite. We need to find a better compromise between those two inaccurate stereotypes. If we fail to do that it is not fair to most students and most institutions, it inhibits their freedom in ways which make them less effective, and it diminishes their social responsibility. There is still a place for what Graham Leicester calls ‘social acupuncture’, highly focused interventions, but large scale blueprints don’t work. What will work is expanding higher education through institutions free to plan according to their views of the future, and with values which guarantee they will use that freedom responsibly.

We need to re-imagine the future in ways which acknowledge the integrity of our sector and our academic practice. The great majority of students have a good experience, according to their own reports, according to our elaborate quality assurance regime, and according to market demand. Most of them get that good experience in institutions which do little or no research. On the one hand we accept that, and argue that there are high standards everywhere. And on the other hand we reinforce an excessively narrow idea of what good higher education means. League tables are hard to resist, in every sense. But we must in future do better than collude with league tables that define research-intensiveness as ideal for deciding which courses are best for undergraduates. We need to re-imagine what we mean by Good Work, and think of academic practice as an integrated whole, not artificially divided into research, teaching and third stream activities. The kind of league table that John O’Leary invented isn’t fair to students or to institutions, and it isn’t socially responsible.

So what should higher education be doing in our changing environment? We need to change how we think, and how other people think about higher education. Higher education is an easy target for cuts, because we have a narrative that is dominated by concerns about quality and standards, value for money, dumbing down, and the dilution of research excellence. And much of that narrative is our fault, for pursuing narrow self-interest instead of the greater good of the whole sector. We need to remake the narrative so that it can be dominated by an appreciation of higher education as a public good, the social and economic transformation it supports, and the values it embodies of open-minded inquiry, learning and personal growth.

To get there we should follow the path of survival, insight, perseverance and hope. We should have in mind the need to protect and promote Good Work - higher education which is not only excellent but also ethical. We need to rethink what fairness means in a diverse sector on a non-level playing field. We should think about how to be fair not only to ourselves and our current students, but also to those who are under-represented or not represented at all in higher education. And that includes people in global communities.
affected by the choices we make. We should think about the kinds of freedom which are most important for Good Work in higher education. Academic freedom needs to be re-imagined as a means of enabling effective teaching as well as research, and recognised as a privilege that comes at the price of enhanced social responsibility, for individuals and for institutions. We should recognise our responsibility for protecting the whole sector, from FE to Oxbridge, rather than trampling the others in a race for the lifeboats. And if we can do all that we will be entitled to expect some kind of dividend from all the spending cuts – a trust dividend which really reduces regulation and micro-management, and a governance dividend that strengthens institutions’ ability to pursue their own diverse visions of the future in an excellent and ethical higher education sector.

References


