

What is a 'University'? What are we Preparing our Students to Progress into?

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This article is part of an ongoing project exploring people's perceptions of what a university is, what it should be and what it might be in the future. The bulk of the essay looks back at the history of universities in England, drawing out a number of 'tensions' that have characterised that history. It then conveys the results of a survey exploring the views of attendees at the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference in July 2018 (entitled, 'Unity and Diversity in the Foundation Year Experience') about what a university is and should be. These results are then related to the themes that arise from the historical overview which lead to some brief conclusions – primarily that we should celebrate the diversity within the English university system while seeking to identify the things that unite us and foster that unity.

Introduction

In his book, *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*, Graham states that 'everyone can acknowledge that McDonald's *Hamburger University* in Illinois is not a real university'¹ – but how do we know that it is not? What is it that enables us to affirm that, say, the University of Oxford *is* a real university, but *Hamburger University* is not (if, indeed, we agree with Graham)?

This article – and the conference presentation on which it is based – is part of an ongoing project exploring people's perceptions of what a university *is* and what they think it *should be* or what it *might be* in the future. As a teacher on a Foundation Year programme, I want to help my students think about what it is that I am helping them to progress into so that I can prepare them well and so that they can make the most of what 'university' has to offer them.

There are numerous ways in which the question, 'What is a "university"?' might be tackled. One approach (the 'descriptive approach') would involve considering lots of representative examples of contemporary universities and *describing* them, perhaps seeking to find those things that are common among them in an effort to pin down what typically characterises what a university *is* today. One significant challenge in such an approach is the huge diversity of

¹ Gordon Graham, *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*. Societas: Essays in Political and Cultural Criticism (Exeter, UK; Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2008), 5. For information on MacDonald's *Hamburger University* see <http://www.mcdonaldsuniversity.com.br/quem-somos/?lang=en>, accessed 27/07/2018.

institutions such that teasing out shared characteristics may not be straightforward. Further questions arise, like: Which are the characteristics that make an institution a ‘university’ rather than any other kind of institution? How many such characteristics would an institution need to display before it is a ‘real’ university (to use Graham’s word)? Are those institutions which have more of these characteristics ‘better’ universities than those with fewer? Another approach (the ‘normative approach’) would involve exploring various understandings of the concept or ‘idea’ of a university and trying to determine what people (scholars in the field, university students, university staff, university management, the wider populace, government, employers, etc.) think a university *should be* and critiquing these understandings. Newman’s book, *The Idea of a University*,² is the best-known example of such an ‘idea’ and it has spawned a wealth of books and articles considering many different ‘ideas’ about what a university should be. One difficulty is deciding which idea is the ‘right’ one. How would one make such a decision? Who will be the arbiter? The ‘idea of a university’ is a powerful concept ... only it is not just *a* concept but many concepts, some of which are in tension with others. Might it then be better to have a ‘fuzzy set’ of ideas upon which to draw? Another approach again (the ‘historical approach’) would involve exploring the history of universities, considering how they came about and trying to determine what their nature and purpose might have been.³ Perhaps if we get a clear picture of what a university *was* in the past that might inform our thinking about what it *should be* now and *might be* in the future. But, of course, things are not so simple. The diversity that characterises contemporary universities may be greater than ever before – there are, after all, a great many of them – but diversity is nothing new. Indeed, throughout history there have been very different kinds of universities and even if we take a particular university with many years of history behind it – say, again, the University of Oxford – we would usually (perhaps always?) find that it is a very different institution now from the one it started out as. It seems clear that universities have evolved over time with the rate of change increasing exponentially. Might it be that the ‘idea’ of the university is also evolving – or *should be* evolving – or is it rather that some pristine ‘idea’ is being polluted or, to use Readings word, ruined.⁴

For the purposes of this article, I am going to focus primarily on an historical approach first (for the bulk of the essay), before relaying the results of a survey undertaken at the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference in July 2018 looking at the question, ‘What is a “university”?’ I shall conclude by discussing these results in relation to the historical overview. I shall be focusing on universities in England because, while this system itself contains considerable diversity, there are aspects of the system which mark it out as quite different from the systems in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, to say nothing of other parts of the world.⁵ I shall consider only those institutions which are officially designated as ‘universities’ – in England this means institutions which have a royal charter as a university or that have been recognised as universities by an Act of Parliament. I shall attempt to do this dispassionately and

² John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014 [1852]).

³ There are a number of books which contain brief histories of UK universities - David Willetts, *A University Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London; New York: Penguin, 2012) are examples. The most accessible full length study is Robert Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (London: Continuum, 2006), and also useful is Malcolm Tight, *The Development of Higher Education in the United Kingdom since 1945*. (Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2009), whose first chapter considers ‘Higher education before 1945’.

⁴ Perhaps the best-known critique of the modern university is Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). There are many other works which decry what they perceive as the current demise of the ‘idea’ of a university.

⁵ With apologies to Welsh, Irish and Scottish colleagues – particularly the Welsh colleagues who were present when I led this session at the conference and who participated readily in the survey.

to present as ‘objective’ an overview as I can of the history of universities in England and of the results of the survey. My evaluative comments will appear in the ‘discussion’ section, where subjective terms like ‘I think’, ‘I believe’, ‘I suspect’ and even ‘I hope’ start to creep in!

Background: A Potted History of Universities in England

It is possible to trace the roots of what we would now call a ‘university’ back to ancient Greece, not-quite-so-ancient China and Egypt, and what Willetts calls ‘the Islamic world’s scientific flowering’.⁶ However, modern universities are usually considered to have their beginnings in medieval Europe. The earliest of these were in Bologna (usually dated to 1088) – where, it seems, the term ‘university’ was first used – and Paris (1150). There are key differences between these two which correlate with discussions about the nature and purpose of universities in current debate: firstly, Bologna has been described as a ‘university of students’ where students sought out their teachers,⁷ while Paris was a ‘university of masters’ where students came to join an existing scholarly community; and secondly, Bologna focused on professional training in medicine and law, while Paris focused on philosophy and theology.⁸

The Medieval English Universities

For over 600 years (while universities multiplied throughout much of Europe and then elsewhere in the world), there were just two universities in England, Oxford (1167⁹) and Cambridge (which was a secession from Oxford around 1209), which largely followed the Paris model. It would be a mistake, though, to think of these establishments simply as institutions of higher learning: as Anderson notes, ‘If there is one point on which historians of medieval universities agree, it is their essentially vocational and utilitarian character.’¹⁰ For hundreds of years, Oxford and Cambridge trained mostly (at least reasonably) wealthy young *men* for service in the Church and the State; degrees were only available to those who professed allegiance to the state church.¹¹ During most of the existence of these universities they were themselves at least to some extent servants of the Church and the State with both these institutions determined to maintain some influence (if not control) over what was taught. (It should be noted that this was true to a greater or lesser extent of many universities throughout Europe and beyond.) Training for medicine and

⁶ *A University Education*, 13. This is discussed, e.g., in David Palfreyman and Paul Temple, *Universities and Colleges: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–5, who point out that arguably the ‘university’ which has been in continuous existence for the longest is the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, dating from 859CE.

⁷ Willetts quotes Cobban’s claim that ‘the lecturing staff had to submit to a competitive trial to win the custom of their fee paying consumers ... teaching was viewed as a commodity like any other’. Alan B. Cobban, *English University Life in the Middle Ages* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 8, quoted in Willetts, *A University Education*, 13.

⁸ See Robert Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (London: Continuum, 2006), 1. Traditionally in much of Europe, there were four ‘faculties’: the so-called ‘higher’ faculties of theology, law and medicine, and the ‘lower’ faculty of philosophy which included other humanities disciplines.

⁹ Though Graham argues that ‘No one can say precisely when university education began in Britain’ because ‘we do not know exactly when “the clerks of Oxenford” first started to study and teach’. Graham, *Universities*, 7. Collini gives the dates thus: ‘[in] Oxford around (probably) the middle of the twelfth century, and in Cambridge in (arguably) 1209’. *What Are Universities For?* 23.

¹⁰ Anderson, *British Universities*, 4.

¹¹ Religious tests for entry into university were eventually banned by the Universities Tests Act of 1871. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/34-35/26>, accessed 27/07/2018.

law (which elsewhere in Europe often took place in universities¹²) was effectively an apprenticeship that happened outside the universities and, as Tight observes, ‘was run by the appropriate professional bodies and employers based in the capital city, London’.¹³ Tight also notes that research ‘was only a minority interest among academics’ and it, too, mostly took place outside the universities.

The total number of students involved was tiny by comparison to today. In fact, the approximately 3000 university students in England in 1450 (according to Anderson),¹⁴ would not have been sufficient to establish a new university in 2000. Numbers seemed to have halved by 1800 at which point Scotland, with a tenth of the population of England (but more than twice as many universities), had around 2850 university students.¹⁵

English Universities in the Nineteenth Century

Important developments in university education happened elsewhere in Europe around the end of the eighteenth century. Of particular note is the contrast between France and Germany, another contrast (like the earlier one between Bologna and Paris) which relates intimately to current debates. During the French revolution, Napoleon abolished the medieval ‘universities’ and instead set up schools (*écoles*) which were effectively departments of state serving decidedly functional ends. By contrast, in Germany Humboldt established the University of Berlin (1810) which he conceived of as a community of scholars engaged in teaching *and* research, where this academic endeavour (*Wissenschaft*) should be conducted as an end in itself and *not* for functional ends.¹⁶ Because of the influence of Humboldt’s ideas (and its outworking in German universities), Collini states, ‘the truth is that *the modern university is essentially a nineteenth-century creation*’.¹⁷

Although some attempts were made to set up other universities in England, these failed because Oxford and Cambridge (with support from the monarch) prohibited their graduates from teaching elsewhere. Not until 1826 was there another university when London University (later to become University College London) was established. It was founded by ‘Benthamites and other practical reformers’¹⁸ as a secular counterpart to Oxford and Cambridge, and entrance was to be on the basis of merit and not church affiliation. Because of its secular foundation, UCL (as it was to become) was not permitted to award degrees. It was quickly followed by an Anglican institution, King’s College (KCL, 1829), and the University of London was formed in 1836 to award degrees for both ‘colleges’. England, like other European states, now had a university in its capital city which made degree-level education available to a broader section of the population,

¹² Anderson notes that ‘Until the mid-nineteenth century, a British doctor with a medical degree was almost certain to have got it in Scotland.’ *British Universities*, 19.

¹³ *The Development of Higher Education*, 5.

¹⁴ *British Universities*, 8. Anderson goes on to note that there was a peak in the 1630s of around 6000, but that ‘a long decline set in ... and the actual number of students did not pass the 1630 (or indeed the 1450) level until the 1860s. It should be noted that the total population in the 1630s was probably around 10% of what it is now.

¹⁵ Anderson, *British Universities*, 17.

¹⁶ See Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘On the Spirit and the Organisational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin (1809/1970)’, in Michael Peters and Ronald Barnett, *The Idea of the University: A Reader*. Global Studies in Education. (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), ch. 4.

¹⁷ Collini, *What are Universities For?* 23, my emphasis.

¹⁸ Anderson, *British Universities*, 33. It is unlikely that Jeremy Bentham played any direct part in the University’s establishment.

but initially not to women who were admitted to study on the same basis as men only in 1878.¹⁹ However, access to a university education was significantly extended when the University of London started to award external degrees in 1858. University colleges sprang up (or existing adult education centres, like the numerous ‘mechanics’ institutions’, converted) in numerous cities where students could now study for a University of London degree. This paved the way for the first major wave of new universities at the start of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, a university was established in Durham (1832) which, like the Oxbridge universities, only awarded degrees to Anglicans. Later in the century (1880), a northern equivalent of the University of London, Victoria University, was formed from Owens College in Manchester and also included colleges in Leeds and Liverpool. Thus, having started the nineteenth century with two universities and perhaps 1500 students, by the end of the century England had five universities (Oxford; Cambridge; Durham; and the two federal universities, Victoria and London) with perhaps around 20,000 students,²⁰ plus other institutions offering University of London degrees and numerous colleges (e.g., teacher training colleges and technical colleges) or institutes which would, in time, become universities in their own right. Thus the nineteenth century saw considerable expansion of ‘higher education’ which paved the way for developments which started in the very first year of the next century.

The ‘Civic’ (‘Red Brick’) and ‘New Civic’ Universities (1900-1957)

The federal Victoria University survived only until 1903 when the constituent elements split off to become universities in their own right. This is the period of the six ‘red brick’ or ‘civic’ universities which were established in the first decade of the twentieth century and within that 10 year period doubled the number of universities in England.²¹ The term ‘civic’ describes these institutions well because they arose (before becoming universities and at least for a period thereafter) to fulfil the needs of the local community and – initially²² – their curricula reflected these needs. Moreover, they were largely established with the support (including, of course, financial) of the community, often local business people, but also, to varying degrees, local councils. A further six similar institutions, the so-called ‘new civics’, joined their ranks in the following decades.²³

¹⁹ Elsewhere in Europe, women had been studying and even teaching in universities for some time, most notably at Bologna. See <https://www.unibo.it/en/university/who-we-are/our-history/famous-people-guests-illustrious-students>, accessed 27/07/2018. It took English universities over 700 years to admit women on an equal basis with men, and the first university in the country, Oxford, only allowed women to matriculate in 1920, around 750 years after its establishment. (<https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/first-woman-graduate>, accessed 27/07/2018.)

²⁰ The figure is taken from Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-1963*, Cmnd 2154 (1963), 15. Full text available online at:

<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>, accessed 27/07/2018. Henceforth, ‘the Robbins Report’. This figure is for full-time students in the whole of the UK so is only an approximation for the total number of students (including part-time) in England.

²¹ The universities were: Birmingham (1900); the constituent elements of Victoria University, Manchester (which became Victoria University of Manchester in 1903), Liverpool (1903) and Leeds (1904); Sheffield (1905); and Bristol (1909).

²² Collini notes a trend in the ‘development of higher education in Britain’: ‘the newer and different types of institution increasingly shed their distinctiveness and more and more conformed to the culturally dominant model’. *What are Universities For?* 28.

²³ Reading (1926), Nottingham (1948), Southampton (1952), Hull (1954), Exeter (1955) and Leicester (1957).

Having considered the development of British universities up to the start of the twentieth century, Collini argues that ‘there were already at least three different kinds of institution among British universities’:

There was the Oxbridge model: residential, tutorial, character-forming. There was the Scottish/London model: metropolitan, professorial, meritocratic. And there was the ‘civic’ model ...: local, practical, aspirational.²⁴

It appears that a diversity of different types of university is nothing new!

Other Factors in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Research

There are some key factors which feed into developments in the second half (roughly speaking) of the twentieth century. Among these we should note firstly the adoption of a standardised PhD in 1917. Newman’s (mid-nineteenth century) famous ‘idea of a university’ infamously eschewed research: he stated that a university is for ‘the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement’, and ‘If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University [*sic*] should have students’.²⁵ Research, he contended, should be done elsewhere. It is difficult to imagine now, when research baulks so large in the English university system (and internationally), but there seemed to be little appetite at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries for research degrees and as they became more widely adopted they were, so Anderson states, ‘originally meant to attract young Americans, diverted from the German universities discredited by the war, rather than to train British academics’.²⁶

University Governance

Secondly, the 22 Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the universities and university colleges first met in 1918. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (to become Universities UK in 2001) was constituted in 1930 and became an important body in terms of presenting the official (management) voice of the universities and advocating on behalf of these institutions.²⁷ The

²⁴ Collini, *What are Universities For?* 28.

²⁵ *The Idea of a University*, vii. Truscot, the pseudonymous author of the book, *Red Brick University*, by contrast, wrote, ‘We must lose no opportunity of stressing the double aim of the university – research and teaching – and of putting research first’. Quoted in Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London; New York: Verso, 2017), 71.

²⁶ Anderson, *British Universities*, 108. Anderson draws on the book by Renate Simpson which provides the fullest discussion of the matter, *How the PhD Came to Britain: A Century for Postgraduate Education* (Guildford: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1983). This is now supplemented by Renate Simpson, *The Development of the PhD Degree in Britain, 1917-1959 and Since: An Evolutionary and Statistical History in Higher Education* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009). Here again the English universities were considerably behind their counterparts elsewhere, particularly Humboldt’s University of Berlin which appears to have introduced its PhDs from the start (1810).

²⁷ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/about/Pages/our-history.aspx>, accessed 27/07/2018. Universities UK states its role as follows: ‘Universities UK is the collective voice of 136 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.’ The mission, purpose, principles, goals and priorities are outlined in ‘Universities UK Strategic Plan 2018-23’, accessed online on 27/07/2018: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/about/Documents/uuk-strategic-plan-18-23.pdf>.

ways in which universities are governed and ‘managed’ has become another increasingly significant aspect of current debates about what kinds of entities universities are.

University Funding

A third factor was the formation of the University Grants Committee (UGC) in 1919. Oxford and Cambridge were long supported by substantial endowments, but the new universities and university colleges of the nineteenth century initially received no state funding and had to find means – including, of course, student fees – to finance themselves. From 1889, state funding was provided, initially £15,000 shared between the institutions.²⁸ The formation of the UGC (which in its early days consisted largely of senior university professors and maintained a somewhat ‘hands-off’ approach²⁹) was a significant step in ensuring funding for university education and it meant that the state became the primary source of funds for universities throughout most of the twentieth century and increasingly took a keen interest in how these state funds were being used. Funding of university education has, of course, become a hugely contentious and divisive issue.

Student Numbers

A fourth factor was the Education Act of 1944 (also known as ‘the Butler Act’).³⁰ The most significant element of this act for our purposes is that it made secondary education free for all 11-15 year-olds and thus increased considerably the number of young adults who were sufficiently qualified to undertake university education. Up to this point, the number and proportion of students taking degree-level studies at university were small (Robbins gives a UK total of full-time students for 1938 as 50,000);³¹ from this point on, student numbers rose and the move from university as an experience for a small ‘elite’ to the ‘massification’ of higher education was under way, along with the massive financial implications of both the increase in student numbers and the increasing costs of ever-more-expensive research. Changes to university education in England in the nineteenth century had been highly significant, but rather slow. Changes in the twentieth century speeded up exponentially as the century proceeded.

Robbins and the ‘Plateglass’ Universities (1960s)

Changes in the 1960s are often linked with the Robbins Report of 1963. The Robbins Report was a highly significant document, particularly its aim (known as ‘the Robbins principle’) that ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.’³² Its 180 recommendations led to numerous changes in

²⁸ Robert Anderson, ‘University Fees in Historical Perspective’, History and Policy, policy papers (2016), <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/university-fees-in-historical-perspective>, accessed 27/07/2018. £15,000 in 1889 is equivalent to somewhere around £2 million today. The total income for UK universities in 2016-17 was over £35 billion of which roughly £30 billion was for English universities. Data from the HESA website, accessed 27/07/2018: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/higher-education-2016-17>.

²⁹ Tight, *The Development of Higher Education*, 124-127.

³⁰ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/contents/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

³¹ The Robbins Report, 15.

³² The Robbins Report, 8. It is notable that in its 2015 election manifesto, the Conservative party took this much farther when they stated, ‘We will ensure that *if you want to go to university, you can*’ (my emphasis). *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015*, 35, www.bond.org.uk/data/files/Blog/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf, accessed 27/07/2018.

British university provision, not least the creation for the first time of a national 'system' of higher education.³³ However, many of the developments of the 1960s were already well underway by the time the report was published. The first thing to note is the creation under the direction of the UGC of completely new universities (the so-called 'plateglass' universities) to cater for a planned large increase in student numbers.³⁴ There were just under 100,000 (99,400) students (part-time and full-time) in England in the year the Robbins Report was published³⁵ and this number approximately trebled over the next three decades up to 1992³⁶. The UGC's plan, worked out in the 1950s, came into effect from 1961-65 with the addition of seven universities.³⁷ These universities were built as campus universities away from large urban centres and were immediately given degree-awarding powers. In addition, ten existing colleges (of advanced technology and others) became universities in this decade,³⁸ and – of huge importance to the development of university education – was the creation of the Open University in 1969.

Another factor in the developments of the 60s was the end of National Service. National Service ended in 1960 and the last conscripts completed their service in 1963.³⁹ This suddenly opened up the possibility of a university education for a large number of school-leavers who would previously have been conscripted – as Willetts notes, 'The annual university intake of around 50,000 young people a year was substantially less than the 150,000 a year doing National Service.'⁴⁰ To this should be added the post-second-world-war baby boom which resulted in increased numbers of school leavers in the early sixties.⁴¹

The formation of UCCA (Universities Central Council on Admissions, the predecessor of UCAS) in 1961 was an important factor in the process of 'systematisation' and centralisation of the admissions process and the Education Act 1962 standardised the fees process by mandating local authorities to pay student fees and provide a (means-tested) maintenance grant.⁴² Both of these preceded the Robbins Report. But following the Robbins Report (and a change of Government in 1964), a decision was announced in 1965⁴³ which was to have far-reaching consequences – and in some ways 'systematised' contrasts I noted earlier between Bologna and Paris, and then between the Napoleonic schools and the Humboldtian model of a university. This was the creation of the so-called 'binary divide' in higher education between 'public sector

³³ The Robbins Report states, 'The fundamental question that we have to answer is whether a system of higher education in the sense in which we have used the word "system" is desirable. As we have said, it is misleading to speak as if there were already a system in this sense.' The Robbins Report, 5.

³⁴ From a UK total in 1962 of 118,000 full-time university students, Robbins projected an increase to 346,000 by 1980 – the actual figure was 307,000. See the table in Willetts, *A University Education*, 47.

³⁵ The Robbins Report, 14-16.

³⁶ Willetts gives the figure of 370,000 for students in full-time higher education in 1990-91. *A University Education*, 47.

³⁷ Sussex (1961), East Anglia (1963), York (1963), Lancaster (1964), Essex (1964), Kent (1965) and Warwick (1965).

³⁸ Keele (1962), Newcastle (1963), Aston (1966), Bath (1966), Bradford (1966), Brunel (1966), City (London, 1966), Loughborough (1966), Surrey (1966) and Salford (1967).

³⁹ Information from <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/nationalservice/>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁴⁰ *A University Education*, 40.

⁴¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281965/live-births-in-the-united-kingdom-uk-1931-1960/>, accessed 27/07/2018. (Information obtained from the Office for National Statistics and the National Archives.) There was a further baby boom during the sixties after which the birth rate dropped considerably, never again to reach the same levels.

⁴² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/10-11/12/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁴³ By Tony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science, at the Woolwich Polytechnic on 27 April 1965.

polytechnics' and 'autonomous universities'.⁴⁴ Tight aptly describes this as 'The creation of a whole new higher education sector'⁴⁵ which added 31 new higher education institutions⁴⁶ to the existing 35 universities during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. A clear divide was established between the (largely) national, autonomous and 'academic' universities which awarded their own degrees and the (largely) local, public sector, and 'vocational' polytechnics which offered degrees awarded by the newly-formed Council for National Academic Awards.

A Quiet Interlude? (1970s and 1980s)

Between the storm of activity in the 1960s and the hurricane that landed in 1992, the 1970s and 1980s might seem like a period of calm and tranquility. This is not the case!⁴⁷ One new university was established in England during these two decades, the University of Buckingham. It was founded as University College of Buckingham in 1973, when Margaret Thatcher was Education Secretary, and became a university under her Government in 1983⁴⁸ – England's first private university. Collini notes three dates of particular significance during Thatcher's premiership (1979-1990).⁴⁹ Firstly, 1981 saw swingeing cuts in university funding, amounting to over 10% across the sector and at times considerably greater than this.⁵⁰ The eventual result was a marked reduction in the *per capita* funding of university education, though this decade also saw a planned reduction in the numbers of university students in the system. Secondly, the first Research Assessment Exercise (the predecessor to the Research Excellence Framework) was undertaken by the UGC in 1986 to assess the quality of research in universities and distribute funds accordingly. And, thirdly, the Education Reform Act 1988⁵¹ – among other things – officially ended tenure for university academics and announced the replacement of the UGC with a Universities Funding Council which was soon succeeded by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England – itself now replaced by the Office for Students and Research England⁵²). This reduced the 'arms-length' operation of university funding and aligned it more closely with government policy. But perhaps of more importance it served 'to expose the

⁴⁴ The wording of this sentence draws on Willets, *A University Education*, 54.

⁴⁵ *The Development of Higher Education*, 71,

⁴⁶ Though these were not created *ex nihilo* but were formed from existing technical and other colleges. Indeed, some polytechnics preceded Crosland, most notably the London Polytechnic which started life as the Royal Polytechnic Institution in 1838 and is now the University of Westminster.

⁴⁷ Tight says, 'If the 1960s were the high watermark of post-war UK higher education development, with continuing public confidence in the system, a generous funding regime for both institutions and students, and substantial growth in numbers, types and sizes of institutions, then the 1970s represent the start of the slide.' *The Development of Higher Education*, 72.

⁴⁸ Margaret Thatcher also served as Chancellor of the University of Buckingham from 1993-1998.

⁴⁹ *What are Universities For?* 33-34.

⁵⁰ According to Michael Shattock, the cuts ranged from 44% at Salford to 6% at York. *Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945-2011* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2012), 124-30.

⁵¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁵² Roughly speaking, 'Research England' is the England-only part of UK Research and Innovation. What is particularly notable is that research funding is now quite separate from other university funding.

universities to market forces'.⁵³ Marketisation and so-called 'massification' were to become key features of the development of universities over the next thirty years up to the present.⁵⁴

We might add two further dates to this list: in 1985 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals published the Jarratt Report which recommended highly significant changes to university governance and management, including 'Recognising the Vice-Chancellor not only as academic leader but also as chief executive of the university'.⁵⁵ As Shattock notes, the Report 'has become symbolic ... of the introduction of managerialism into universities'.⁵⁶ Secondly, The Student Loan Company was established in 1989: hence the history of government-facilitated student loans is now nearly thirty years old, and, of course, continues to be a highly contentious matter and is perhaps *the* aspect of English universities which attracts most public attention.

Polytechnics become Universities (1992) – and (Most) Pre-92 Universities Respond

'Massification' took a major step forward following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992⁵⁷ when the number of universities nearly doubled again as the polytechnics changed to universities (33 of them in 1992 alone,⁵⁸ plus Derbyshire College of Higher Education) and, indeed, the number of universities in England more than doubled from 35 in 1990 to 71 in 2000 with the further addition of Cranfield (1993) and UMIST (University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, 1994⁵⁹). Student numbers rose even more dramatically, more than trebling between 1990 and 2000 when the total number of students enrolling in English universities reached 1,656,700.

In reaction to the then near-doubling of the number of universities, 17 of the established research universities⁶⁰ met in 1984 and formed the Russell Group of Universities to protect the interests of its member institutions and to advocate on their behalf.⁶¹ A further group of 17

⁵³ Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, "Policy on Higher Education and Research: The Rede Lecture 1991," *Higher Education Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1991): 204-18, 205, quoted in Tight, *The Development of Higher Education*, 78. Shattock has a section of his book discussing developments at this time entitled, 'The 1980s and the emergence of the idea of a market'. *Making Policy*, 145-55.

⁵⁴ David Palfreyman and Ted Tapper refer to 'massification, marketization, and managerialism' as key drivers of change for English universities, leaving them 'wrestling with and being shaped by competition, commodification, commercialization, consumerization, and with corporate governance replacing collegiality'. *Reshaping the University: The Rise of the Regulated Market in Higher Education* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 276.

⁵⁵ Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, *Report of the Steering Group for Efficiency Studies in Universities* (London: CVCP), 36.

⁵⁶ <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/jarratt1985/index.html>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁵⁷ *Making Policy*, 218-19.

⁵⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁵⁹ Anglia Ruskin (originally Anglia Polytechnic University), Birmingham City (originally Central England), Bournemouth, Brighton, Central Lancashire, Coventry, De Montfort, East London, Greenwich, Hertfordshire, Huddersfield, Kingston, Leeds Beckett (originally Leeds Metropolitan), Lincoln (originally Humber-side), London Guildhall, Liverpool John Moores, London South Bank, Manchester Metropolitan, Middlesex, North London (merged with Guildhall to form London Metropolitan), Northumbria, Nottingham Trent, Oxford Brookes, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Sheffield Hallam, Staffordshire, Sunderland, Teesside, West London (originally Thames Valley), Westminster, West of England, Wolverhampton.

⁶⁰ UMIST merged with Victoria University of Manchester to become University of Manchester in 2004.

⁶¹ Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial, Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL and Warwick. Since then the following universities have joined: Cardiff, KCL (1998); Belfast (2006) and Durham, Exeter, Queen Mary and York (2012).

⁶² <http://russellgroup.ac.uk>, accessed 27/07/2018.

mostly smaller pre-1992 universities formed the '1994 group',⁶² though this was disbanded in 2013 following a number of its members being admitted to the Russell Group (which now has 24 member institutions). The response of 'new' universities was to set up in 1997 the Coalition of Modern Universities (which became the Campaign for Mainstream Universities in 2004, then MillionPlus in 2007) to advocate on behalf of recently established (post-92) universities.⁶³ It now has 20 members.⁶⁴ (A further grouping of mostly new 'new' universities, University Alliance, was formed in 2006 and has 18 members.⁶⁵)

Brown notes that 'the existing universities were not before 1992 subject to any external quality regime' for their teaching quality.⁶⁶ In 1990 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (the predecessor to Universities UK) set up the Academic Audit Unit to assess teaching quality; the Academic Audit Unit became the Higher Education Quality Council which carried out Teaching Quality Assessments from 1993, a role continued by the Quality Assurance Agency which was established in 1997 and, of course, the various forms of the TQA have now (since 2017) morphed into the Teaching Excellence Framework (to partner the existing Research Excellence Framework).

The 1990s also saw the start of another form of 'accountability' with the first ranking of UK universities in 1993, 'The Times Good University Guide'.⁶⁷

Preparing for the Twenty-first Century – the Dearing Report (1997)

Two events from the 1990s have contributed to seismic shifts in university education. The first was the awarding to polytechnics of university status, described above. The second was the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997.⁶⁸ Although the Report relates to many aspects of the work of universities, its main focus – and what it is best-known for – is the question of finances in an era when close to 40% of the age cohort were going to university and *per capita* funding had fallen by around 36% since 1989. According to Collini, this report 'was taken to signal the end of "universal free higher education tuition."'⁶⁹ Although the precise recommendations were ignored by the recently elected Blair Government (with David Blunkett as Secretary of State for Education and Employment), 1998 saw the introduction of fees charged to students, initially

⁶² Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, UEA, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Lancaster, LSE, UMIST, Reading, Royal Holloway, St Andrews, Surrey, Sussex, Warwick, York.

⁶³ <http://www.millionplus.ac.uk>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁶⁴ Abertay, Anglia Ruskin, Bath Spa, Bedfordshire, Bolton, Canterbury Christ Church, Cumbria, East London, Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands and Islands, Leeds Trinity, London Met., London South Bank, Middlesex, Solent, Staffordshire, Sunderland, West London, West of Scotland.

⁶⁵ Brighton, Central Lancashire, Coventry, Greenwich, Hertfordshire, Huddersfield, Kingston, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester Met., Nottingham Trent, The Open University, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth, Salford, Sheffield Hallam, South Wales, Teesside, West of England. <http://www.unialliance.ac.uk>, accessed 27/07/2018. 'The Alliance of Non-aligned Universities' (2006) became 'University Alliance' in 2007. The Guardian described these groups as 'a sign of the increasing division of the higher education sector into competing factions'. Accessed online on 27/07/2018:

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2006/jun/13/highereducation.research1>.

⁶⁶ Roger Brown, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience since 1992* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 35.

⁶⁷ John O'Leary, *The Times Good University Guide: The Definitive Guide to Britain's Universities* (London: Times Books, 1993).

⁶⁸ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (London: HMSO, 1997). <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html>, accessed 27/07/2018. Henceforth, 'the Dearing Report'.

⁶⁹ *What are Universities For?* 181.

£1000.⁷⁰ Blunkett introduced the fee as a flat-rate upfront payment and scrapped the maintenance grant (replacing it with a maintenance loan) which had been in operation country-wide since the 1962 education act and more sporadically before that.

The Dearing Report also proposed the establishment of what became in 2000 the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, a professional body which offered teaching accreditation for lecturers in HE. The ILTHE then merged with other organisations to become the Higher Education Academy in 2004; the HEA became part of Advance HE in 2018.⁷¹

The Noughties – and a Further Wave of ‘New’ Universities

There was a further wave of 22 ‘new’ universities in the ‘noughties’ (2000-09), resulting from a range of processes, including the ‘upgrading’ of existing colleges of different types (including university colleges, colleges of higher education, teacher training colleges and others), the merging of existing universities, the break-up of federal universities (Surrey and Victoria in Manchester⁷²) and (in the case of Imperial) separation from the University of London.⁷³ By the end of the decade, there were 89 universities in England with over two million students (2,093,635).⁷⁴

The Government’s white paper, ‘The Future of Higher Education’ (2003),⁷⁵ and the subsequent Higher Education Act 2004⁷⁶ introduced further significant changes to university funding, in some ways enacting what had been proposed in the Dearing Report. The cap for student fees was raised to £3000, the up-front fee was scrapped and replaced by an income-contingent loan, and the maintenance grant was reintroduced.

The Current Decade – Increasing Numbers of Universities; Increasing Diversity; Increasing Tuition Fees

The last few years have seen a further 18 institutions given the title ‘university’ and these institutions are increasingly diverse.⁷⁷ They include a number of private universities (both for-profit and not-for-profit, some owned by major international providers, some having been

⁷⁰ Tuition fees came into effect with the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/30/contents/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁷¹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/about-us>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁷² The federal University of Wales also split up.

⁷³ Gloucestershire (2001), London Metropolitan (2002), Bolton (2004), University of the Arts (2004), Roehampton (2004, part of the Federal University of Surrey from 2000-2004), Manchester (2004), Canterbury Christ Church (2005), Chester (2005), Winchester (2005), Liverpool Hope (2005), Solent (2005), Bath Spa (2005), Worcester (2005), Northampton (2005), Chichester (2005), Bedfordshire (2006) Edge Hill (2006), York St John (2006), Imperial College (2007), Cumbria (2007), Buckinghamshire New (2007) and University for the Creative Arts (2008).

⁷⁴ ‘Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education 2011’, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/data-and-analysis/Pages/patterns-and-trends-uk-higher-education-2011.aspx>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁷⁵ Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education* (London: Stationary Office, 2003). <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20040117000548/http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁷⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/contents/enacted>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁷⁷ The University of Law, University College Birmingham, Bishop Grosseteste, Arts University Bournemouth, Falmouth, Harper Adams, St Mark and St John (aka Marjon), Leeds Trinity, Royal Agricultural, Norwich University of the Arts, Newman (all 2012), Regent’s, BPP (both 2013), St Mary’s Twickenham (2014), Arden (2015), Suffolk (2016), Leeds Art University (2017), and Ravensbourne University (2018).

bought and sold by private equity companies), universities with numerous sites around the country, a range of specialist universities and some very small institutions (the number of students on degree programmes required for an institution to achieve university-status has decreased over the last couple of decades⁷⁸). Pearson College London is, perhaps, an illustrative example of what is to come: the College states its mission as becoming ‘one of the UK’s leading universities for in-depth industry engagement’, claiming that

We’re transforming higher education. As a FTSE 100 company, immersed in industry, we do things differently. Industry engagement is at the core of everything that we do, and it’s what sets us apart.⁷⁹

There are a further fourteen specialist colleges which have degree awarding powers, at least some of which may in time become universities.⁸⁰ In addition, NCG (formerly Newcastle College Group) was granted degree awarding powers in 2016. It states,

Our nationwide portfolio of businesses includes six colleges and two training providers. We work with 45,000 learners and 7,800 businesses every year, operating in 61 locations across the UK.⁸¹

Presumably there is the potential for NCG (and other large – or not so large – colleges or ‘groups’ which include colleges) to seek university status in due course.

Diversity of provision has become a key element in contemporary university provision and – while student numbers have plateaued at just under 50% of the age cohort (around 1,900,000 students, consistently lower than the peak in 2011-12 of 2,097,230⁸²) – even though the cap on student numbers was removed in 2015 – the number of universities continues to increase. From just 2 universities for 600 years from around 1200, the number more than doubled to 5 during the nineteenth century, reached 71 during the next century and now stands at 106 universities in England – within the first two decades of the 21st century.

⁷⁸ From 1999, an institution seeking to be a university had to have over 4000 FTE students and be able to offer research degrees. At least 3000 students needed to be on degree level courses with at least 500 in each of five broad subject areas. Institutions awarding only taught awards were eligible for the title ‘university college’. These stipulations were relaxed in 2004 and again in 2010 such that full university status could be awarded to institutions offering only taught degrees and only 1000 students in total, 750 of whom need to be on degree level course. Further changes were introduced in 2017 and from 2019 there will be no minimum number but 55% of students will need to be on HE courses. In addition, institutions offering single subject degrees will be able to achieve university title. See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/degree-awarding-powers-and-university-title/>, and https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1210/ofs2018_11.pdf, accessed 07/08/2018.

⁷⁹ <https://www.pearsoncollegelondon.ac.uk/about-us/about-pearson.html>, accessed 27/07/2018 (my emphasis).

⁸⁰ Royal College of Music, Royal College of Art, Royal Northern College of Music, Ashridge Executive Education, London Institute of Banking and Finance, University College of Estate Management, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Writtle University College, British School of Osteopathy, AECC University College, Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, Hartbury College, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, and, notably, ‘Richmond, the American University in London’ whose students can now obtain both US and UK degrees. There are a number of UK campuses of universities from other countries but no others – as yet – are able to offer UK degrees.

⁸¹ <https://www.ncgrp.co.uk/>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁸² Figures from HESA web page, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/higher-education-2011-12>, accessed 27/07/2018.

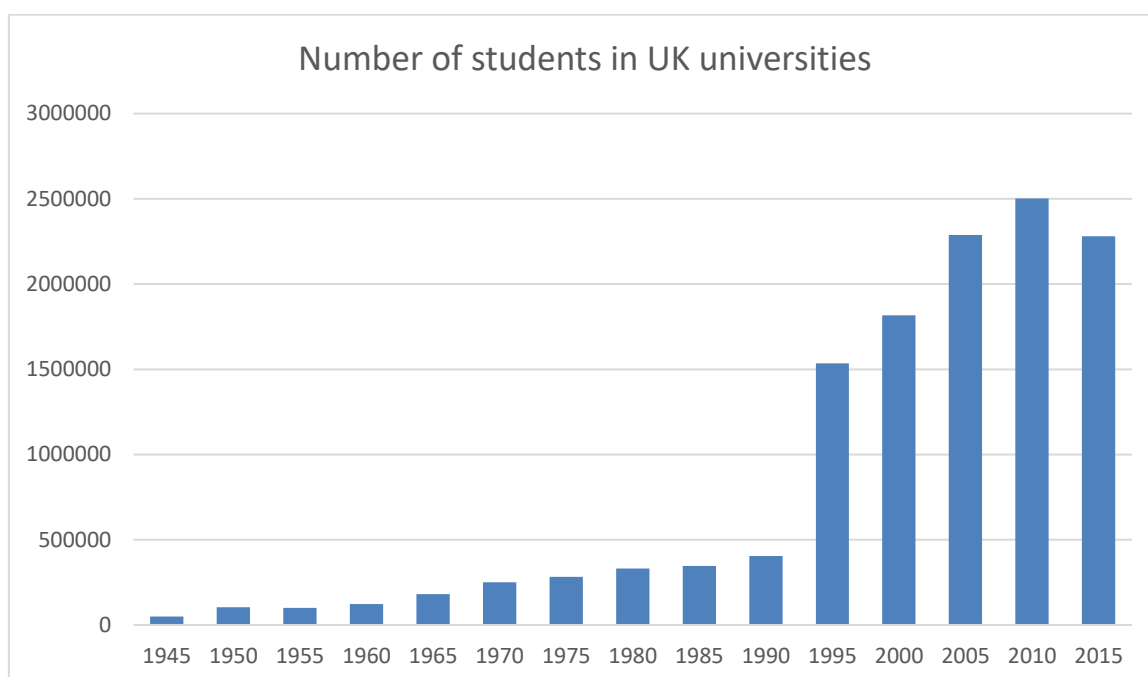


Chart 1⁸³

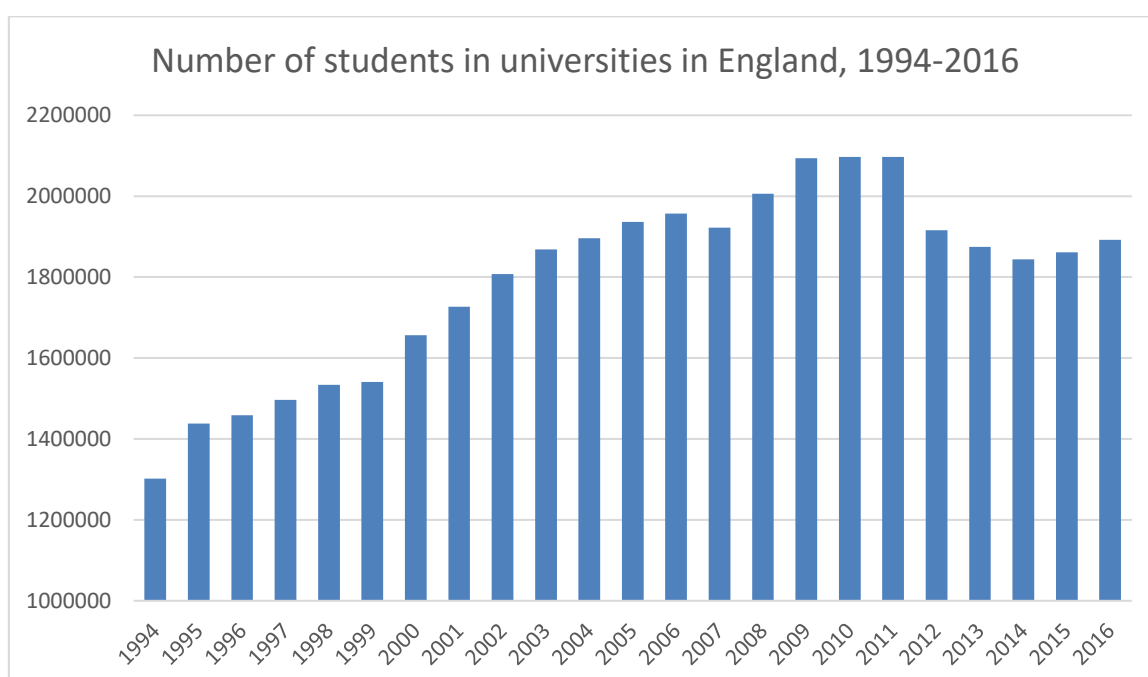


Chart 2⁸⁴

⁸³ Figures are taken from Tight, *The Development of Higher Education*, 55, supplemented by HESA data, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁸⁴ Figures are taken from HESA data. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>, accessed 27/07/2018.

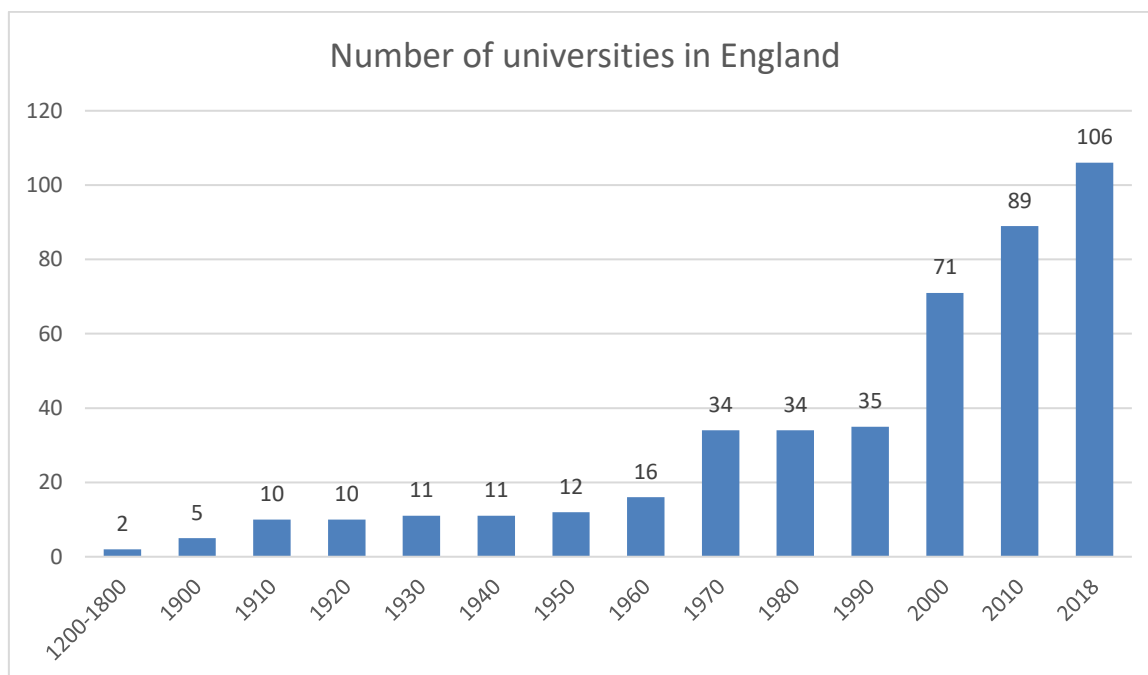


Chart 3

With so high a proportion of the population now entering university education and with so many institutions providing that education, the question of funding has become acute. The Browne Report, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (2010),⁸⁵ sought to address the question – this time explicitly to develop a ‘sustainable’ system of funding for universities (and higher education providers) whereby these institutions were no longer so dependent on state support.⁸⁶ The timing of the Report is significant: it came during the 2008-13 recession when the Government was implementing severe and wide-ranging cuts in an effort to address the national debt and the 2010 Spending Review saw a cut of 40% to the teaching budget for higher education. The ‘headline’ features of the Government’s response to the Report, published in the White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (2011),⁸⁷ were the withdrawal of much of the funding for undergraduate teaching and the increase of the fee-cap

⁸⁵ Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An independent review of higher education funding and student finance* (London: Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, 2010), accessed online on 27/07/2018 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance>. Henceforth, ‘the Browne Report’.

⁸⁶ Shattock calculates that ‘Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the state met only about one third of university expenditure’ but ‘By 1979-80 the state’s contribution ... had risen to about 80 per cent’. This included student fees. *Making Policy*, 103-04. In 2016-17, state funding in England was around 12% which does not include student fees which make up about 50% of universities’ income. Elsewhere, in an article entitled, ‘Public Expenditure and Tuition Fees’, Shattock discusses state funding in some detail, describing the earlier period as the ‘nationalisation’ of higher education, and the period since Browne as ‘denationalisation’. Claire Callender and Peter Scott (eds), *Browne and Beyond: Modernizing English higher education* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2013), 15-31.

⁸⁷ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (London: HMSO, 2011). www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2011-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf, accessed 27/07/2018.

from £3,290 to £9,000 (though – contrary to the Report’s recommendation – it did not remove the cap altogether). Notably, according to Callender and Scott,

The government also sought to create greater provider competition by simplifying the regulations for obtaining and renewing degree-awarding powers to make it easier for new providers to enter the sector and by reviewing the use of the title ‘university’.⁸⁸

The twin concepts of ‘competition’ and ‘choice’ were then the key themes of the Government’s White Paper in 2016, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*,⁸⁹ which introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework. This document explicitly states that ‘Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.’⁹⁰ It is now explicit government policy that higher education should be ‘marketised’, with students as consumers in a market which offers them increasing choice.

‘What is a “University”?’ Survey

I conducted a survey of foundation year practitioners at the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference in July 2018.⁹¹ 80 people completed the survey and identified themselves in the ways represented in table 1. This indicates that a broad range of types of institution were represented though the numbers do not correlate with the numbers of institutions which fall into each category.⁹² There was also a good geographical spread across England (plus representatives from Wales) and a reasonable (though not comprehensive) coverage of different subject areas. All participants were involved in some fashion with foundation year provision and it is likely that this has had an effect on the responses such that there may be ways in which they are not typical of responses that would be achieved from university staff (and students) more generally.

⁸⁸ *Browne and Beyond*, 6. This book provides a thorough discussion of various aspects of the Browne Report.

⁸⁹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice*. Cm 9258. London: HMSO, 2016.
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/sites/default/files/breaking_news_files/higher-education-white-paper-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf, accessed 27/07/2018.

⁹⁰ *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, 8.

⁹¹ A copy of the survey is included as Appendix A.

⁹² The terms are not always clear but by my reckoning the numbers of universities in England (counting the University of London as one university) in each category are as follows: 17 Russell Group universities; 18 pre-92 universities (non-Russell Group); 34 post-92 universities and 37 new universities (designating as ‘new’ any university established after 2000, excluding the University of Manchester [Russell Group] and Imperial College London [Russell Group]).

role	no.	institution	no.	discipline	no.	location	no.
academic	73	Russell Group	37	science/maths	28	north	31
non-academic	6	post-92	24	social science	23	midlands	26
student	1	pre-92 (not RG)	12	arts and humanities	9	south	18
		new	6	various/other	8	Wales	5
		other	1	engineering	6		
				business/management/law	6		
total	80		80		80		80

Table 1

The survey was designed to determine the following:

- What do respondents think university *is*?
- What do respondents think university *should be*?
- Do respondents think there are aspects of what constitutes 'university' that should be common to *all* universities?
- And, if so, what are those aspects?

Respondents were asked to complete the survey on their own and to answer the questions quickly in order to get 'gut reactions' rather than carefully-thought-through answers.

They were first asked to 'give 3 words or terms which describe what you think a university in England *IS*', then to 'give 3 words or terms which describe what you think a university in England *SHOULD BE*'. Among the responses common to both questions, just under a third (30%) referred to learning and teaching (or equivalent or near-equivalent terms) in relation to what a university *is* and just over a third in relation to what a university *should be* (34%). Notably, 28% specified 'research-focused' (or similar) for what a university *is* while that dropped to 18% for what a university *should be*. Even more dramatically, 20% described what a university *is* as 'vocational' (or similar) which decreased to only 4% for what a university *should be* while 3% described university as 'transformational' (or similar) and that increased to 10% for what it *should be*. Creating or disseminating knowledge was similar in both: 11% (*is*) and 13% (*should be*). 8% made reference to 'personal development' (or similar) in relation to what a university *is* while that increased to 29% in relation to what university *should be*; similarly 3% described university as 'transformative' (or similar), while 10% stated that it *should be*. These comparisons are represented in table 2.

'university' is:	%	%	'university' should be:
focused on learning and teaching	30	34	focused on learning and teaching
research-focused	28	18	research-focused
vocational	20	4	vocational
creating/disseminating knowledge	11	13	creating/disseminating knowledge
for personal development	8	29	for personal development
transformative	3	10	transformative

Table 2

By contrast, in relation to what a university *is*, the most popular answer was something along the lines of 'a business', 'money-driven' or 'marketised' (36%), while these things did not feature at all in relation to what a university *should be*. The most popular answer for what a university *should be*, revolved round the notion of accessibility, inclusivity and openness, in the sense that a university education should be open to all (38%, though it often was unclear

whether this meant all those ‘qualified by ability’⁹³ or simply all-comers regardless of ability). On the other hand, 14% described what university *is* as ‘elitist’ (or similar). Another contrast was between the 10% who described university as expensive (or similar) compared with 19% who stated that university should be free. 6% referred to university as conservative or old-fashioned (or similar) while 10% thought that university should be forward-thinking, progressive or creative. 14% indicated that university should be inspiring, exciting, fun (or similar); none used these words in relation to what university is.

‘university’ is:	%	%	‘university’ should be:
a business/money-driven/marketised	36		
elitist/restrictive/hierarchical (for the masses)	14 (4)	38	open to all/accessible/inclusive
expensive	10	19	free
conservative/old-fashioned	6	10	forward-thinking, progressive, creative
		14	inspiring, exciting, fun

Table 3

There were few significant differences across the categories (type of university, broad discipline and rough location) and, given the relatively small numbers involved and the fact that the numbers surveyed do not correlate well with the proportion of people in these different categories across the English university sector, it is not possible to draw reliable conclusions about such differences. I do, however, note with interest that colleagues from Russell Group and pre-92 university were more likely to draw attention to the vocational aspect of what a university *is* than their peers in new and post-92 institutions (24% and 25% compared with 0% and 13%) and, while no-one from the new and post-92 universities asserted that this *should be* an aspect of a university, some Russell Group and pre-92 colleagues did (3% and 17%). It is perhaps not surprising that there should be a higher proportion of those from new universities who described university as ‘elitist’ or ‘hierarchical’ (33%), but 11% of Russell Group and 25% of pre-92 colleagues did so also and the highest proportion of those who thought that university should be free were from Russell Group institutions (27%).

Respondents were then asked to rate on a Likert scale their response to the statement, ‘There are aspects of what constitutes a “university” that should be common to all institutions in England which bear the name “university”.’ The vast majority agreed/strongly agreed with the statement, with only a small number disagreeing as shown in table 4.

‘There are aspects of what constitutes “university” that should be common to all institutions in England which bear the name “university”.’					
strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	total
26	44	8	2	0	80
32.5%	55.0%	10%	2.5%	0.0%	100%

Table 4

The specifics of what these aspects are overlap significantly with what respondents said a university *should be* (not surprisingly): thus high up the list were words or phrases associated

⁹³ The ‘Robbins principle’ states that higher education should be available to all those ‘qualified by ability and attainment’ which raises questions of access that are particularly relevant for foundation year programmes and this featured heavily in responses to the survey.

with openness and inclusivity (42%), learning and teaching (34%), knowledge creation and acquisition (28%), research (18%) and personal development (13%). However, in addition, standards and quality rated highly (28%), as did support for students (18%), and ethical practice/social concern (9%). Notable additions include words associated with criticality and specifically *higher* learning (16%), teaching and research *together* (10%), responsiveness to local needs (9%), and creativity/innovation (6%).

Aspects that should characterise all universities:	%
openness/accessibility/inclusivity	42
learning and teaching	34
knowledge creation and acquisition	28
standards and quality	28
support for students	18
criticality/ <i>higher</i> education	16
teaching and research <i>together</i>	10
ethical practice/social concern	9
responsiveness to local needs	9
creativity/innovation	6

Table 5

Discussion

Tradition ascribes to the wisest man of his time the words, 'There is nothing new under the sun.'⁹⁴ This is true of universities: the issues which dominate contemporary discussions around the nature and purpose of universities have been around in some form or other for a long time. Thus I considered in my 'potted history' a range of different 'tensions' which have faced universities throughout much of their history since medieval times, and particularly since the start of the nineteenth century, and continue to do so today. These include the following:

- Should universities focus on 'students' or 'scholarship'?
- What balance should universities achieve between teaching and research?
- Should a university education be more 'vocational' or more 'academic'?
- How should university 'autonomy' relate to university in service to 'the State' (or, at times, the Church)?
- To what extent should universities be 'local' and to what extent 'national' (or, now, international or global)?
- Should a university education be somehow restricted (say on the basis of ability or prior achievement) or should it be genuinely open to all who want it?
- Should universities operate on some form of 'collegial' basis or should they be more 'managerial'?
- Should universities be viewed more as 'communities' or as 'corporations'?
- Should universities be driven by 'the pursuit of knowledge' or should they be driven by 'markets'?
- What balance should be achieved between state-funding and other sources of funding (including student fees)?

⁹⁴ This popular saying finds its origins in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes (ch. 1, vs. 9), traditionally ascribed to King Solomon who, according to the Bible, was renowned for his great wisdom.

- Should a university education be considered more of a 'private good' or more of a 'public good'?
- Should individual universities offer a broad range of degrees or is it appropriate for at least some of them to be specialist institutions?
- Should students be treated primarily as 'consumers' or more as 'learners'?
- Should universities be more 'competitive' or more 'collaborative'?

My repeated use of the word 'should' here indicates the impossibility of separating the normative from the historical and descriptive. These are all very important questions which face all English universities today – and to a greater or lesser extent those who work in them and study at them as well as other stakeholders (which in one way or another includes a large swathe of the population: those who employ graduates, those who run and work in businesses in towns and cities where there are universities, those who work in local and national government, those who work in or study at schools and colleges which send students to university, those affected by the research undertaken in universities ... those whose taxes continue to support the work that universities do and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, etc.). There would be widely divergent views on all these questions both within and outwith the universities themselves and something of this diversity came across in the survey (where there were responses relating in some way to all these questions). While acknowledging this diversity I would offer the following broad summary of the responses:

There was an acknowledgement that a university *is* marketised and operates as a business but little indication that it *should be* this way. The main thing for this group that characterised what a university *should be* was openness and inclusivity with a good proportion noting that it *is* currently elitist, restricted or hierarchical. Perhaps this is not surprising given the nature of foundation years, many of which have a widening participation agenda. It was noted that learning and teaching *does* characterise universities and strong affirmation that it *should do* (and similarly with acquisition and dissemination of knowledge though to a lesser extent). There was – among this group as a whole – less enthusiasm for research but still acknowledgement that it *does* characterise universities and *should do* so. The vocational aspect of university education as it *is* was noted by many but relatively little indication that it *should be* so. By contrast, while some stated that university *is* about personal development, many asserted that it *should be* and, particularly when those who said that university *should be* transformative or life-changing (10%) are taken into account, this is a significant theme in the responses to the survey. A good number stated that university *is* expensive; almost twice as many asserted that it *should be* free. There was some sense that university *is* conservative and old-fashioned but a belief that it *should be* forward-thinking, progressive and creative. Among things that should characterise all universities – in addition to what is covered above – were support for students, standards and quality, *higher* education, ethical practice or social concern, and responsiveness to local needs.

It seems clear that if the survey were conducted with others in the university community (to say nothing of those outwith that community) this narrative would be nuanced in different ways. That is not necessarily a problem in itself. The tensions listed above (and others) are, I think, inevitable aspects of 'being university' – and in some way always have been – and I suppose there will always be disagreement about how to resolve (or live with) the tensions:

- Universities *are* about the needs of individual students but are also the main home of scholarship with a key role in protecting and furthering ‘knowledge’.
- Teaching and research are *both* key aspects of what happens in universities and are intimately and inextricably linked with *higher* education.
- Universities always have combined – though to different degrees – the vocational and the academic, and, again, the two are ultimately inseparable.
- The autonomy of English universities has always been important, but it has never been absolute, nor can it be. The relationship between ‘the University’ and ‘the Government’ will probably always be a tricky one and perhaps it is inevitably so.
- Most (all?) English universities are *both* local and national institutions although to different extents; most (all?) English universities will continue to struggle to balance their local and national roles.
- I think most would agree that university admission should be on the basis of merit; I think most would agree that university is not for everyone. I suspect we will always struggle to work out how best to implement the ‘Robbins principle’ so that a university education is not denied to those who would benefit most from it – and consequently bring benefit to the wider community.
- I suspect that a degree of managerialism is inevitable. I hope that there are ways of being managerial that involve also an element of collegiality. I suspect we will continue to struggle (as other businesses do also) to combine these things in appropriate ways.
- Universities *are* corporations – I think that is undeniable. Universities *are* communities – I think this aspect of their nature is underplayed. I suspect that here, too, we will continue to struggle to work out how to be both.
- The ‘pursuit of knowledge’ is, I believe, close to the heart of what university *is* and what it *should be*. I think we need to work hard to determine how to combine this with the current reality of a market-driven economy.
- The State cannot afford to pay for universities and there has to be some degree of shared responsibility for their funding as, indeed, there long has been. I do not suppose we will ever agree on how that responsibility should be shared out!
- I think it is obvious that a university education is *both* a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good’. My suspicion is that one or other of these is emphasised depending on what case is being made. Again, I suppose it has always been thus and probably always will be. It behoves universities to argue a strong case for both ‘goods’.
- There have long been universities with a narrow (perhaps ‘specialist’) focus – this is nothing new. We have, though, become used to a dominant model (or ‘idea’) of ‘a university’ which offers a broad range of degrees. This is certainly not the only model on offer and I suspect we need to be open to considering a range of different models.
- In some sense students *are* consumers and, as such, ought to have their consumer-rights protected. However, they are not *just* consumers and I believe there are some significant challenges in balancing our current perceptions of ‘consumer-rights’ with students’ roles as learners who need to invest significantly in the ‘product’ if they are to enjoy its benefits.
- A degree of competitiveness is, I think, inevitable, particularly in what is now a huge sector. But I suspect it has always been thus to some extent, even when the sector was very small (i.e., two universities). However, I believe that collaboration is also essential to the best education at whatever level: we are not just members of our local university community, we are also members of THE University community (in its various disciplinary forms) and serve ‘the pursuit of knowledge’ best when we collaborate with others around the country and the world who are also engaged in that pursuit.

In Conclusion

The theme of the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference 2018 was 'Unity and Diversity in the Foundation Year Experience'. The concept of 'diversity' has featured often in this article: diversity has characterised the 'university' from its earliest days and does so increasingly. As a number of respondents to the survey noted, this is something to be celebrated. We come from vastly different institutions which 'do university' in quite different ways. Moreover, within each institution there will be a range of different ideas about what the university *is* and, even more so, what it *should be*. Inevitably this will create tensions at times, tensions that I hope to have shown are actually nothing new. My conclusion is that we should celebrate diversity and live with the inevitable tensions that throws up while also continuing to work to identify those things that unite us and foster that unity so that the 'University' can continue as an important, effective and flourishing institution – albeit probably an ever-evolving one – well into the future. The Foundation Year Network (given its obvious diversity) is a good place to start!

Appendix A

On the next page is a copy of the survey which was used during the Foundation Year Network Annual Conference in July 2018.

Please fill in the following table – in large letters so that it is easy for others to read at a distance!

Role at university: (e.g., academic staff, student, non-academic staff)	
Type of Institution: (e.g., post-92, new university, Russell Group, other pre-92, Oxbridge)	
Broad discipline: (e.g., engineering, social science, natural science, arts, business)	
Rough location: (e.g., north, south, midlands, other UK, other non-UK)	

Give 3 words or terms which describe what you think a university in England IS:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Give 3 words or terms which describe what you think a university in England SHOULD BE:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Rate the following statement by circling the appropriate answer below:

'There are aspects of what constitutes a "university" that should be common to all institutions in England which bear the name "university".'

strongly
agree

agree

neither agree
nor disagree

disagree

strongly
disagree

Please indicate in this box some of those things which you think should be common to ALL universities in England and/or give reasons why you think this is problematic or even impossible.

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Doug Ingram is one of two dedicated members of staff who run the Arts Foundation Year at University of Nottingham. This is a new venture which is about to enrol its third cohort of students. Previously Doug taught Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at a number of different colleges and universities, including some adjunct teaching in California and Sri Lanka. Doug has been on the Foundation Year Network Executive Committee for two years, the second of these as Secretary (and he continues in this role). He is one of the founding editors of the *Journal of the Foundation Year Network*. Doug can be contacted at: doug.ingram@nottingham.ac.uk.

