



How We Got Here: UK Higher Education under Neoliberalism

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Abstract

This paper looks at how higher education (HE) in the UK has been transformed since the advent of neo-liberalism in the 1970s. It is based on my personal experiences over four decades, as well as the research literature, and argues that the changes in HE have been the direct result of policy changes shaped by neo-liberal thinking. After a brief outline of the recent history of HE, I look in detail at how the management systems have changed, both in individual institutions, and in the management of the HE system as a whole, through the application of the ‘new public management’ approach. Resistance to these changes has been problematic, given a wider economic culture increasingly centred on individual performance, not collective purposes. Although it might be possible to recreate an imagined ideal of collegiality and critical engagement, a truly alternative future for HE needs to begin from rethinking the education system as a whole, basing it around the promotion of substantive equality of wealth and power throughout society.

Introduction

The multiple crises of higher education (HE) in the UK have their origins in the economic, social and political transformations that constituted the rise of neoliberalism since the mid-1970s. That rise was associated in particular with the



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rule of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US, and then spread across the globe under the auspices of the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and (in the 1990s) the European Union also. It is based on four processes of change in the political economy of capitalism: privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and globalisation. By 2000 these had become the norm in all parts of the world, and although the credit crisis and global recession of 2007-9 called the whole process into question, as of 2012 neoliberalism remains the dominant political philosophy across the world.

Within the UK public sector, the form taken by neoliberalism has been the “new public management” (NPM), or “new managerialism”. This is a particular combination of Stalinist hierarchical control and the so-called free market, in which the values, structures and processes of private sector management are imposed upon the public sector; key elements include a shift from professional to executive power, a focus on ‘performance’ as measured by quantitative targets, and the widespread use of financial incentives. Meanwhile, the purpose of the university has changed from the education of the elites in business, politics, culture and the professions to the provision of marketable skills and research outputs to the ‘knowledge economy’.

Although these developments only became clearly visible after the ending of the UK’s ‘binary divide’ (discussed later) in higher education in 1992, they first surfaced in modern form in Britain in 1970, following the Warwick University files affair (Thompson, 1970). A student occupation of the Registry had revealed the systematic maintenance of secret files on politically-suspect students and staff, and subsequent investigations revealed that Warwick had from the start been established as a ‘business university’: its overall direction was subordinated to the needs and purposes of a regional and national business elite, and its internal management system departed significantly from the then-prevalent collegial norm. The public exposure and subsequent debate, however, did not lead to democratic reforms, but to a much more effective strategy of integrating academics into the emerging managerial model.

Having participated in the Warwick files affair as a graduate student activist and researcher/writer, I went on to work in UK higher education, teaching and researching in the field of political economy. I held posts in economics departments, business schools and finally a politics and international studies department; and I undertook a wide range of administrative tasks at departmental, faculty and university levels before my retirement in 2008. My career therefore spanned the period in which UK higher education was transformed under the aegis of neoliberalism.

The purpose of this essay is to put the current commercialised model of HE into its historical and sociopolitical context, drawing on my own experiences as well as the available literature. It had its origins in some personal reflections on the Warwick files affair on its 30th anniversary (Radice, 2000), and a paper exploring

the analogies between our university system and the Soviet system of central planning, which finally appeared as Radice (2008b). In 2004 I was unexpectedly proposed and appointed as a Head of School; in the following three years I was then able to observe closely the culture, style and substance of central management in a large university. Subsequently I was invited to speak about UK HE at an assembly of mathematicians in Paris, during the 2009 strike by French academics opposed to reforms ostensibly based on the UK model, and what follows is based on the presentation that I gave. The next section provides a very brief recent history of UK higher education; this is followed by an analysis of the present model in relation to the hegemonic institutions and practices of neoliberalism. The final section examines the potential for resistance and the development of an alternative approach based on democratic participation and social engagement.

UK higher education – a brief recent history

Leaving aside the ‘ancient’ foundations (Oxford, Cambridge and a few others), the main universities established in Britain from the late 19th century to the present were created by ‘royal charter’, a form of state licence granted by Act of Parliament. They were very largely created on the initiative of business and political élites in particular localities; at least since 1945, they were funded by central government, but managed with very considerable autonomy. Strong academic independence was traditionally coupled with close relations with business, local government and the professions.

The principal activity of HE has always been undergraduate and postgraduate education. In the 1960s, alongside the creation of a wave of new universities, a second sector of higher education was formally recognised, in the form of polytechnics created from local technical institutes and colleges. These were funded and managed by local authorities, and their academic teaching (establishment of degree programmes and award of degrees) controlled by a central Council for National Academic Awards. In 1992 the so-called ‘binary divide’ between universities and polytechnics was abolished under the Major government. Meanwhile, teacher training had come to form a third element of HE, with specialist training colleges upgrading qualifications to degree level, and expanding their programmes to include other subjects (usually arts or social sciences with vocational emphasis); these colleges eventually either merged with universities or polytechnics, or became universities in their own right. Most recently, tertiary colleges originally formed to offer post-secondary but sub-degree qualifications, mainly vocational in character, have widely taken up degree-level work, usually in collaboration with universities. By the end of the century, all higher education within England came under the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), with parallel bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although the increasing overlap with non-degree post-secondary provision has complicated the funding structure once more.

Academic research in universities has a more complex structure, and centres on four distinct systems. First, there are public-sector research institutes in a wide range of areas, including nuclear weapons, agriculture, public health and transport: these are controlled by particular ministries and ultimately the government in Parliament. These, together with a wide range of independent and usually non-profit institutes, typically have close relations with HE but stand outside its governance structures.

Second, the Research Councils (in broad academic fields) are funded by the government, and direct research through the allocation of funds for specific research projects and for multi-project research programmes. Individual researchers or teams, usually based in universities, compete for these funds by submitting proposals which are vetted by academic peers in accordance with the Research Councils' priorities and guidelines. These in turn are established by representatives of HE institutions, professional associations, appropriate government bodies, and increasingly, private and non-profit bodies seen as benefiting from research outcomes.

Third, HEFCE provides 'infrastructural' research funding to universities through its annual grant process. These funds are distributed on a subject-by-subject basis according to each institution's performance in the regular Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This began in the early 1990s, with the deliberate aim of concentrating research capacity in selected 'centres of excellence'; the last RAE was in 2008, and has now been replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF; see HEFCE, 2012).

Fourth, institutions are encouraged to solicit research funding from the private sector. This has always been a vital source of funds in sciences, engineering, medicine and business studies. Most recently there has been an emphasis on 'knowledge transfer' (now renamed 'research impact'), by which is meant the application of practical research outcomes by commercial or non-commercial outside bodies.

The neoliberal restructuring of universities

While there is general agreement on the empirical content of neoliberalism, there are important differences in how its underlying purpose is understood. In the social sciences, the most systematic explanations are found in the comparative analyses, both through time and across countries, of institutional variety in capitalism. Mainstream studies in the disciplines of economics, politics, sociology, anthropology and geography all concur in focusing on variation in the mix of market and state in the ordering or regulation of economic activity. The tendency in such study is to assume a common set of public policy objectives, and study the comparative performance of different institutional orders, e.g. 'liberal' versus 'coordinated' market economies (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

By contrast, critical analysts such as Harvey (2005) argue that policy objectives are contested between class interests, and that systemic institutional changes within capitalism are undertaken primarily in order to contain or roll back threats to the hegemony of capitalists from subordinate classes. From this standpoint, contemporary neoliberalism had its origins in the threats posed to the postwar US-led global capitalist order in the period from 1961 to 1975, including challenges from labour within the advanced industrial economy, from those disadvantaged by race or gender within postwar national settlements, from the Soviet threat to world hegemony, and from postcolonial challenges in the Third World (see also Radice, 2008a).

Within this context, the application of neoliberal thinking to higher education stems from the multiple key functions of HE within capitalism: providing higher-level work skills for future managers, professionals and entrepreneurs; developing the framework and content of formal education at all levels; and producing the beliefs and attitudes that constitute the culture and shape the practices of the ruling élites. More specifically, in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional detachment of universities from society, summed up in the cliché term ‘ivory tower’, came to be seen as symptomatic of the wider decline in the country’s global economic and political standing (Wiener, 1981). In an increasingly competitive post-imperial international environment, higher education needed to be harnessed systematically to improving economic performance: hence not only the rapid expansion of the system in the 1960s, but also the erosion of institutional autonomy through the development of more active financial management.

Although this is usually seen as starting in 1979 with the election of Mrs Thatcher’s first government, the autonomy of universities began to be eroded already in 1976, when the Labour government ended the previous system of five-year plans in favour of annual settlements. Universities were now required to negotiate in effect continuously with central government, in a national context of runaway inflation, budget deficits, deindustrialisation, and widespread industrial unrest. In this period, university lecturers were caught in a sudden pay freeze that substantially reduced their real income and presaged the decline in relative income and status that has continued ever since; indeed, 1979 saw the AUT (Association of University Teachers) lobbying the House of Commons, under the accurate if abstruse slogan, ‘Rectify the Anomaly’ (in our pay).

In the 1980s there were important further changes. First, formal academic tenure was abolished: academics could now be sacked by management fiat, e.g. because of a decision to close a particular field of study, although this remained subject to procedures for redeployment or redundancy negotiated through collective bargaining between employers and unions. Second, ‘full cost’ fees were imposed on overseas students, mostly postgraduates, who thus became a major source of discretionary income for universities. Third, rigid control of UK undergraduate student numbers was combined with a continual decline in the

financial support per student (under the Orwellian term ‘efficiency gains’): this led directly to rapidly-rising student/staff ratios and class sizes.

In the 1990s, a more systematic transformation of HE began in earnest, which many critics have seen as exemplifying the increasing dominance of neoliberal ideas, often highlighting the different ways in which knowledge is treated as a marketable commodity rather than the result of a collective social endeavour (Jary and Parker, 1998; Levidow, 2001; Robinson and Tormey, 2003). In the absence of a functioning market system based on private ownership, the application of neoliberal thinking in the UK public sector centred on what came to be called the ‘new public management’ (NPM) approach (Rhodes, 1994). We can analyse separately its internal and external aspects in higher education.

Internally, NPM centred on devolved budgetary systems and a shift in focus from academic goals and processes to financial management. Although practices varied a good deal, the central feature for most academics was that the subject department or school became a ‘cost centre’. In this approach, all costs and revenues of the university as a whole are attributed to individual cost centres; the department must cover its salary costs, and its allocated share of central costs such as physical facilities, library, IT services and central administration, from the income attributable to its teaching, research and other commercial activities. At the higher levels, participatory decision-making under the control of a Senate largely made up of academics has been largely replaced by executive decision-making. A small team of top-level academics works with the directors responsible for each functional area of management, such as finance, human resources, marketing, estates, research support, and teaching quality control. Academic senates have, to all intents and purposes, become a rubber stamp on decisions taken by these senior executives.

At departmental level, academic appointments and new teaching programmes, can now only be made within the framework of approved financial plans, although these can always be over-ridden by executive action from above. This encourages the sort of behaviour well known from state enterprises in the old Soviet planning system, which bargain with the ministries in whose jurisdiction they fall over output targets and the allocation of inputs. The Soviet specialist Ron Amann (2003) deployed this analogy in an essay on modern British public administration, following his experiences as Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (1994-9), and Director General of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies in the Cabinet Office (1999-2002); the case of HE is examined in Radice (2008b). The keys to successful management for a head of department are to anticipate the wishes of the ‘centre’, to cultivate its approval by rebranding activities according to its current preferences, and to develop and maintain ‘off-plan’ streams of revenues for discretionary spending.

Externally, there was a steady increase in government prescription and control, much of underpinned by what anthropologists have termed the ‘audit

culture' of NPM (Strathern, 2000; see also Shore, 2010). The best-known and most disliked elements were the externally-imposed quality control systems – the RAE (now REF) for research, and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for teaching. While the RAE sought to sharply differentiate funding levels according to the results of a system of peer review, the QAA had no direct financial impact as such, but its gradings of teaching performance were publicly announced and provide a major input into the 'league tables' published by the broadsheet press (especially the *Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Telegraph*).

Financial management in HE came to focus on full-cost pricing, which was extended from overseas student fees to every sphere of activity, including all teaching and all research. In this model, managers must in principle allocate and record *all* attributable costs to specific activity streams. Many inputs are costed at 'shadow' prices, allocated by the centre in the absence of actual market prices, and as a result there are constant struggles to obtain favourable price levels on important cost elements.

One particularly absurd by-product of the full-cost obsession was the Transparency Review process initiated by HEFCE in 1998. This was intended to measure, for each institution and across the system as a whole, the distribution of costs between the three core activities of teaching, research and other (for a brief introduction to the process, see e.g. University of Bristol, 2011). Within each institution, individual academics were required to record on a standard template, for sample weeks, how their work time was divided between teaching, research and other (and then within the latter, teaching-related or research-related 'other' activities, etc.). The template required us to allocate all our work for a given week (including weekends) between the given categories, for every 15-minute period, in a manner reminiscent of primitive systems of work study in early 20th-century industry.

In addition, HEFCE enforces its preferred objectives by setting aside significant amounts of income which are only obtained for specific purposes. Some of these are laudable, such as the recruitment of students from socially-disadvantaged areas and social groups. Others are the product of current NPM fads, notably 'performance-related pay', or what used to be called 'payment by results'. For this purpose, every single post, currently occupied or to be filled, must have a detailed job specification, and the post is then allocated to a particular pay grade by a mechanical process called Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA). This purports to identify 14 distinct attributes which can be separately identified, and their relative significance measured, in any job within the university. This apotheosis of Taylorist 'scientific management' (Clawson, 1980, 202-253) is a complete sham, since managers simply model the specification of any new post on the basis of an existing post already classified to the desired pay grade.

Finally, there is constant emphasis on the international competitiveness of the university, and of UK HE as a whole. This is usually measured by international

league tables, and vice-chancellors set targets for their universities' ranking; thus my own university's vision statement currently reads: "By 2015 our distinctive ability to integrate world-class research, scholarship and education will have secured us a place among the top 50 universities in the world".

Resistance and alternatives

During the Conservative administrations of 1979-97 there was a remarkable change in the political culture of British higher education. The decline in resources was clearly understood as part of a wider Tory assault on the public sphere, and among staff and students alike, political allegiances shifted to Labour and the Liberal Democrats. When New Labour came to power in 1997 a new era was widely anticipated, but this hopes were quickly disappointed. Although student numbers and total higher education spending rose, resources per student continued to fall, and the government accelerated the drive for managerial control and the subordination of both teaching and research to corporate objectives.

Organised resistance by academics, both before and during the New Labour years, has centred on the academic trade unions. Until the formation of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) in 2007, trade unionism in higher education was split between the Association of University Teachers (AUT), based in the traditional universities, and the National Association for Teachers in Further and Higher Education (formerly the ATTI) in the post-1992 universities, technical colleges, and from 1976 the teacher training colleges (for more detail see UCU, n.d.). While the ATTI had affiliated to the Trades Union Congress in 1967, the AUT only did so in 1976, and a large minority at least of its members have continued to see themselves as professionals rather than 'workers'.

Both UCU and its predecessors have found it difficult to respond to the changes in higher education since the 1970s. Membership recruitment and mobilisation has been severely damaged by the growth of short-term contracts, and of private-sector funding and collaboration. UCU is currently fighting to maintain national collective bargaining, given that the levels of funding and the nature of academic work increasingly vary between different institutions. Strong local organisation can set good benchmark agreements that can then be fought for elsewhere in similar institutions. But in general, as in other parts of the UK public sector, the union has not effectively resisted or challenged the imposition of NPM, and instead has followed a largely defensive traditional strategy focused very much on protecting pay and conditions of service. Given increasing hostility to trade unionism from the media and from all major political parties, it has been difficult to maintain the support and participation of the membership in campaigns on these issues, although the AUT strike of 2005 was an exception.

A more effective strategy of resistance has to incorporate full consideration of the purposes of universities and the changes discussed above. At a general level, the combination within the NPM approach of (free) market and (Stalinist) plan is in no way a paradox: rather, this is the normal life of a capitalist enterprise. While

externally regulated by the market, under capitalism production itself is subject only to the authority vested in the owners of private property. The UK university of today has become a simulated private enterprise, with effective possession by a self-selecting academic-business elite. There are good opportunities for some academics to join this elite. A successful career based on positive performance evaluations can lead to recruitment to the level of senior management, or in public relations language, 'academic leaders'. They are increasingly well-rewarded, with special payments that can be permanent and pensionable (an important consideration when the standard pension has traditionally been 50% of final salary, and public sector pensions are now under attack). As a result, it is not surprising that, as one of 30 Heads of School in my university from 2004-7, I could count on only three or four to join me in actively criticising elements of NPM in public debate, although more would express sympathy in private.

Those outside the managerial élite have been increasingly subjected to the process of deprofessionalisation or proletarianisation, which has affected not only the rest of the UK public sector, but also fields such as legal practice, accountancy and architecture (on lawyers see Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007). The traditional model of autonomous professional partnerships in these fields is giving way to a corporate private enterprise model in which only a small minority (predominantly white and male) retain control, while the rest become salaried workers managed from above.

The question remains as to why academic staff have acquiesced so readily in these changes. Just as the changes themselves only make sense in the broader context of the rise of neoliberalism, so too the response of academics needs to be seen in the context of cultural changes in society, in this case the shift from a collective to an individualistic concept of citizenship. The continuing cultural resistance among academic staff to seeing themselves as workers reflects a wider societal illusion, central to the acceptance of neoliberalism as common sense (as in Gramsci, 1971, 323-43). The illusion is that we are first and foremost not social beings, but free individuals, able to determine our own destinies through the accumulation and deployment of our 'human capital'. This concept was developed in mainstream economics (Bowles and Gintis, 1975), and has been widely deployed in public policy debates in recent years. In employment relations, such a self-conception entails the acceptance of permanent performance monitoring to provide a supposedly objective basis for the competitive differentiation of rewards; in Marxist terms, accepting the commodification of labour power (see e.g. Harvie, 2006). This makes it extremely difficult to resist the implementation of monitoring procedures couched in benign and therefore intrinsically acceptable terms such as efficiency, transparency and accountability.

Within the workplace there is a further specific obstacle to effective resistance. The processes of commercialisation and cost allocation have tended to force a separation of research from teaching (Coate, Barnett and Williams, 2001). The consequences of this for the generation and dissemination of knowledge in society are very serious, and completely ignored by successive UK governments.

Despite the designation of special funding streams for ‘teaching excellence’ and ritual incantation of the phrase ‘research-based teaching’, success in research – measured by published outputs and external funds obtained – has become the primary yardstick of academic success. The emphasis on commercial outcomes has been especially damaging to long-term ‘blue-skies’ research, and to non-commercial activities such as the provision of local adult education services, which have almost totally disappeared. In their remaining core activities, academics have been increasingly encouraged to compete with each other for resources, both within and between institutions, which undermines the solidarity needed to pursue collective agreements that benefit everyone. For individual academics wishing to work outside the mainstream, the focus on cost may paradoxically allow greater freedom than earlier criteria based on social or cultural norms: thus I was able to teach a course on Marx’s *Capital* in a business school in the 1990s, because I was able to recruit enough students for the course to ‘pay its way’. However, such advantages for particular individuals are no substitute for the collective responsibility which, in principle, the academic community was expected in the past to take for the overall content of research and teaching.

If the present trajectory of higher education under neoliberalism is maintained, any effective campaign of resistance has to offer a new model of social engagement, in which the university really seeks to be a *universal* institution accessible to all. But there are dangers in attempting to remodel HE starting from the narrow basis of its present engagement with society. Of course, many academics would like a return to a more collegiate system of management, in which decisions require more than just the formal approval of rubber-stamp Senates and their subordinate bodies. Equally, many would like to see an end to the relentless pressure from on high to drum up income from the provision of straightforwardly commercial goods and services, whether contract research or business and professional skills training. An alternative in which a self-policing professional academy pursued disinterested research, and provided an education based on critical engagement and personal development, would undoubtedly attract many currently labouring under the lash of temporary contracts and endlessly recalibrated performance targets: see, for example, the alternative set out by Castree (2010).

But precisely because higher education is such a core component in the reproduction of élite power in contemporary capitalism, a truly democratic alternative can only be imagined starting from an alternative conception of society as a whole. Suppose that this alternative is based on a substantive equality of wealth and power, rather than the meritocratic notion of equality of access and opportunity, with collective governance through an equally substantive universal democracy. In such a society, the upbringing of citizens through the combined efforts of families, communities and specialist educational organisations would aim to develop them all to a broadly equal level of knowledge and capabilities, enabling them to combine a degree of specialisation in the tasks required to meet social

needs with a universal engagement in the making and implementation of decisions about resource allocation. An educational system based on these principles might well be structured institutionally into an age-related sequence, with the final level now able to embody genuinely universal access — a university at last worthy of the name.

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