

# Higher than what?

**Patrick Ainley**

School of Education & Training

## Introduction

With its world heritage site Greenwich can potentially create a university that combines the best of the old with something new. That this does not happen automatically shows that the French sociologist of education, Pierre Bourdieu, was wrong in his contention that higher education is all form and no substance. But what is the substance of 'higher' learning? *Higher than what? Further than where?* as Sir Toby Weaver, author of our 1965 Woolwich Polytechnic speech, asked.

Some would answer that higher education's (HE) 'higherness' comes from specialisation but this is also the case in further education (FE). Others would assert academic freedom allows HE teachers to set their own courses linked to their research interests. However, although there is not (yet) a National Curriculum for HE, many programmes of study have long been agreed with professional bodies. And in an institution where the main activity of most staff is teaching or supporting teaching, research and scholarship exist, we admit, only in 'pockets'. So this is not distinctive either. Therefore, when we are pushed to characterise 'higherness', we fall back on what we often look for in student assignments: A critical analysis of the information required. This is seen as 'deep' rather than 'surface' knowledge. Yet these tacit notions are often confused so that we know them when we see them but find them hard to justify explicitly. This contribution to Greenwich's new pedagogic journal seeks to do this as simply as possible in the interests of stimulating debate and innovation.

## Academic higher education

Academics typically elicit metaphors of an ideal HE, 'above' or 'higher' but definitely 'apart from' the rest of society. This provides an independent space in which ideas can be tested in argument and by experiment. For its student apprentices, HE is seen to provide the conceptual tools to question received ideas and test their own claims to truth against the relevant criteria of their particular subject, whether through scientific experiment, logical proof, scholarly or more directly social research, technical practice or artistic creation.

Students then graduate to mastery of their respective disciplines, or to areas of practice in which they are able to defend, in the wider world, the conclusions they have arrived at in discussion with the community of scholars that includes their teachers. Such discussion is encouraged by teachers, who themselves learn from representing their understandings based upon research in the subject community to which they belong.

Many programmes of study in HE are based on this implicit model. Students are presented with the received ideas of the canon as conceptual tools with which to order the information base of their subject discipline or area of practice. They are, thus, not in a position to produce academically acceptable work until they have 'received' the knowledge of the masters. This is not knowledge of everything, but of the rules by which everything that is known about a given field

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can be acquired and ordered. This 'key knowledge' (not 'skills') is what Cardinal Newman called 'knowledge of the relative disposition of things', the lack of which, he wrote, 'is the state of slaves and children' (1943, p. 113).

Newman could have added women and the working class of his day to those lacking this knowledge, even though they might have seen things differently. The class division between the professions associated with HE and the trades associated with FE is one of the many things that have changed in modern society. The idea that universities prepare an educated elite for leadership is no longer sustainable. Yet, competition in the examination of levels of literacy as proxies for what Bourdieu called 'cultural capital' (itself a proxy for money capital) has become intense. Competition starts earlier and goes on longer, with the result that the traditional selectivity of English education now stretches from primary to postgraduate schools. In this selective system, the majority are failed at every fence and made to feel they are failures.

As Michael Young predicted in his 1958 satire on the 11+ 'IQ' test, the result is:

'there has never been such gross over-simplification as in modern Britain. Since the country is dedicated to the one over-riding purpose of economic expansion, people are judged according to the single test of how much they increase production, or the knowledge that will, directly or indirectly, lead to that consummation... The ability to raise production, directly or indirectly, is known as 'intelligence': This iron measure is the judgement of society upon its members.' (pp. 134–5).

A footnote reveals Young's real view:

'that it is the very complication of modern society which demands the sort of basic intelligence that can speedily relate one part of a complex whole to another.' (p. 160).

## **Alternatives to academicism**

Alternatives to traditional disciplinary academic specialisation, which is paradoxically supposed to provide generalised managerial knowledge, have been extinguished with the dominance of a subject-centred National Curriculum in schools and the imitation of the pre-existing university model by renamed polytechnics. Nevertheless, teachers in all HE institutions continue their mission impossible to widen participation whilst maintaining quality on a reduced unit of resource.

So, rather than seeking to perpetuate traditional academic approaches, why do we not try to do something different? As Dame Ruth Silver, ex-principal of one of our partner colleges, Lewisham, suggested five years ago, at the same time as Greenwich and Goldsmiths' students 'aim higher', why should they not also go further by attending their universities' partner colleges to acquire the practical competences employers always complain are missing in graduates who have only theoretical 'book knowledge' without practical application. This would combine 'higher' with 'further', education with training and 'deep' with 'surface' learning, or theory with practice. What Silver called 'thick HE' would thus unite practical competence with generalised knowledge. Unfortunately the idea never caught on!

However, this is the way to think about 'employability', for instance. Students outwith the charmed circle of the magic five top universities to which the big banks now reportedly restrict their choice

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of recruits, have to convince remaining employers that, while their abstract 'book knowledge' may not be expressed with the elegance of technical and largely literary exercises of the traditional type, their practical experience has given them the 'nous' to put that theory into practice. In the long term however, the crisis of legitimacy for a competitive education system undermined by recession, calls into question the continuing separation of the academic from the vocational (as in the latest diploma qualifications, for instance) and demands the integration of generalised knowledge with skill and competence.

One response might be a foundation year for all undergraduates as in Scotland, were it not for the fact that rising fees mean more expense for students. As Graff writes of the USA, "“first year experience” courses... need to go beyond teaching study skills, time-management, using computers, and test-taking to give students more help in entering the academic culture of arguments and ideas." (2003, p.12) Why not use the anticipated fee revision to admit that most of our nominally full-time students are actually part-time and provide part-time courses costed and paced accordingly?

Living at home whilst studying also reduces the intensity of traditionally compressed 3-year subject degree courses. Alongside 'standards-based' vocational courses on which skill is confined to competence and knowledge to information, this all makes large parts of HE more like FE. This is not to disparage FE, but to take the opportunity to complement academic courses with practical placements and training in the poly-technical generic competences required across the range of available employment (so-called 'personal and transferable skills'). It also recognises that you cannot have education without training (though you can have training without education). Real craft and professional skills can be cultivated in FE and HE, alongside the generalised knowledge imparted by HE no longer restricted to its academic (largely literary) form.

Above all, educational community should be preserved in the dialogue of teachers with students. We also need dialogue and debate amongst staff across disciplines, while being open to revision of our preconceptions and practices – just as the traditional notion of HE expects students to be (above). Then we would not accept at face value such current pedagogical fads as 'learning styles' and 'emotional intelligence'. Hopefully this journal will contribute to this process.

## **No magic bullets**

There has already been too great an expectation that the expansion of HE can change society on its own. So, while not abandoning the transformative aspiration of education, we have to be realistic about its prospects at the close of the economic period in which most of our students grew up. Between 1986 'Big Bang' and 2008's 'Big Crunch', several things happened at once and these need to be appreciated to set the framework for discussion:

- **A reformation of social class** to which expanded education and training has contributed. Until the late 1970s, many left school at 15/16 followed by apprenticeships for some (mainly young men). This may have represented 'jobs without education' but associated cultural conceptions of skill have been largely lost in what has become life-long learning (instead of lifelong earning, again for men at least). The division of labour and knowledge between working-class manual and middle-class mental labour has been eroded by the growth of services and the application of new technology, which has been used to automate and outsource formerly skilled work, while the

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'unskilled' or 'rough' section of the traditionally manually working class has been relegated to so-called 'underclass' status. Meanwhile, processes of deskilling formerly applied to skilled manual workers are now reaching up the new 'respectable' working-middle of society to reduce many former-professions to the level of waged labour. Thus, for example, widening participation to higher education has been presented as the professionalisation of the proletariat while arguably disguising an actual proletarianisation of the professions, including notably the academic profession. There is an important gender dimension to this complicated situation.

- **A new competitive state has replaced the old welfare state.** In the administration of this 'post-welfare state', power contracts to the centre as responsibility is contracted out to individual agents (institutions or individuals) for delivery. In education, this has turned a national system locally administered into a national system nationally administered. Despite recent calls for international Keynesianism, the new competitive system remains in place so that its individually competing institutions – such as schools, colleges and universities – still depend upon centralised contract funding in the new marketplace for students and research. This has fuelled increasing student numbers without always enabling sufficient support for it.

- **Young people are over-schooled and under-educated**, well described by a University of Greenwich Education Studies undergraduate in his final year inquiry project in 2004:

'Students learn to connect their self-esteem and what they may achieve in later life to their exam results... Over-assessment has made subject knowledge and understanding a thing of the past as students are put through a routine year after year, practising what exactly to write and where in preparation for exams'.

- **The application of new ICT to education has facilitated a culture of cutting, pasting and plagiarising.** Despite the access to information which this has afforded, in many cases, as Wolf writes: 'These students are not illiterate but they may never become true expert readers' and their 'false sense of knowing may distract them from a deeper development of their intellectual potential.' (2008, 225 and 226; see also CIBER, 2008) **The massification of popular culture** has added to the overwhelming of intellect by information.

## Conclusion

To indicate the wider context of so-called 'dumbing down' above goes beyond the knee-jerk academic reaction of more selective examination. Instead, FE and HE together give those failed by over-schooling an entitlement to overcome their under-education. But we cannot do so by offering more of the same. More means different, as used to be said. Just how different is a matter for debate in the pages of this journal and elsewhere on a campus which can live up to its heritage status by creating a community of students and teachers aiming higher whilst going further.

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