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Consuming the towering Eton mess in Higher Education

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The last week has seen extraordinary news and confused reactions that expose the competence of our government to public scrutiny. The spread of the new Coronavirus has greatly challenged the understanding of our political leaders. Our trust in political leadership has been superseded by more trust in scientific

advice with Boris Johnson saying at one stage that we will be *"led by the science"*. Indeed, we also need more rational scientific decision making across government to resolve the fine 'Eton mess' in which we find ourselves. The ongoing development of our Higher Education system has become a terrible mess. Planning seems conflicted and confused to the point that crisis may be around the corner. Problems are piling up like a towering 'Eton mess' that could easily topple over.

Defining the challenge with accurate data, asking the right questions and methodical planning must supersede the political ideologies that abound. There is no room in a pragmatic approach for sticking with failed ideologies of the free market or socialist utopian dreams. The world needs more educated people. The economy must shift with the many emerging environmental dangers and we must be clever enough to redefine how we achieve this. Higher education must be able to release all of the talent and ideas in the UK fairly and equally. It is becoming more urgent that we consolidate the higher education provision with a coherent plan and not the mess that is emerging

The University Challenge.

A variety of reports and offerings spread around the media world this week and infected the minds of those worried about the future of universities and students. Together they lead to a general sense of crisis and impending chaos. Many commentators stressed the likelihood that universities would come under intense pressure from the government (see Guardian 1st March [‘Universities brace for government scrutiny after Policy Exchange report’](#)). It is already the case that teaching grants are being cut this year and will see further cuts next year and beyond (see TEFS 20th January 2020 [‘Augar, Second Class Citizens and another review’](#) and Office for students [‘Consultation on implementing savings in academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21’](#)). Add to this a possible cut in fee income from student number caps and possible lower fees, and the situation becomes even messier. The [Policy Exchange](#) report this week [‘Universities at the Crossroads’](#) certainly pulls few punches. Its former civil servant authors, Lucian Hudson and Iain Mansfield, layout a bleak future for universities under a rampant conservative government if they do not change fast. There is also little sympathy for them after consulting with a cited eight organisations and 28 senior people in HE. The forward notes that it was *“Drawing on more than 50 interviews, on and off the record”* and this arouses suspicion as to who they were and how selective the views might be. The headline *“How higher education leadership must act to regain the trust of their staff, their communities and the whole nation”* sums up the somewhat eclectic discourse well. It seems universities are falling well short on engagement with both the population and the government. Leadership and governance come in for criticism alongside perceptions of *“low-quality degrees”, “widening access”, “grade inflation, unconditional offers and vice-chancellors’ pay”*. This feeds a hungry government with multiple targets to burst the bubble that has protected universities for

many years. However, it is a positive thing that widening participation is stressed as one of the “*wicked problems*” that must be tackled. Unfortunately, the line taken is that this must be done by “*reversing recent trends on unconditional offers and grade inflation*” and “*working with and supporting schools well before the point at which pupils consider applying for university*”. The alternative idea of ‘contextual admissions’ (See Sutton Trust [‘Access to advantage’](#)) to encourage disadvantaged students is missing and this is very worrying. It is also at odds with the support offered to the idea of ‘contextual admissions’ by the OfS in its January 2020 report [‘Transforming opportunity in higher education An analysis of 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans’](#). It seems that attainment of those with advantages would still trump those with ability but with few advantages. Without it, there may be little movement on widening participation soon (see TEFS 19th April 2019 [‘Grade inflation and contextualised admissions to university are stirring up a wasp’s nest’](#)). The report begins to look like a shopping list of things for the government to use to churn up the cosy university sensibilities.

Who is ‘Policy Exchange’

It seems they might be simply broadcasting ideas circulating in government to cause alarm and panic in universities. This is at a time when industrial unrest is spreading with the current intensive rounds of strikes by [University and College Union \(UCU\)](#) members. Indeed, the report mentions the discontent amongst many staff regarding pensions and the increase in casualised labour. However, the authors did not think to actually mention UCU by name, or interview them, despite being a highly influential driving force in university policy. Their solution is evident with “*If the sector can achieve a comprehensive settlement on pay, pensions and working conditions, it might be able to address the underlying concerns of an increasingly discontented workforce, and put the sector on a more financially sustainable footing.*” That means accepting continued low pay and less secure pensions with an unnamed VC saying “*To avoid worsening industrial relations, we have not given further consideration to a shift from a pension scheme based on defined benefits to one based on defined contributions. But we cannot carry on kicking the can down the road. With fixed student fees, rising pay inflation, something has to give.*” This only sets the tone for the further divergence of views and more conflict.

But then this is to be expected from what has been described as a ‘right-wing thinktank’ with Conservative origins. The Policy Exchange describes

itself as "*the UK's leading think tank*" and an "*educational charity*". It stresses the fact that it doesn't take commissions and is independent. However, it was set up in 2002 by conservative politicians that included MPs Nicholas Boles, as its director, Francis Maude and Michael Gove as chair. However, the question as to who funds them is much more obscure. A report in 2017 [‘Think Tanks in the UK 2017: Transparency, Lobbying and Fake News in Brexit Britain’](#) by the organisation [Transparify](#), backed by George Soros, looks at the transparency of such groups. That report gives a zero-rating of transparency for Policy Exchange despite having 31 staff and a budget of £2,633,000. It then openly accuses Policy Exchange of "*fabricated evidence*" to generate fake news and cites past misdemeanours. The UK organisation [‘Who Funds You’](#) also gives Policy Exchange it's lowest rating with no explanation of where it's £3,030,827 came from in 2018. The Charities Commission [report for 2018](#) notes that it gains most of its income from donations and legacies at £2.49M. Its own latest [Annual Report and Financial Statements from 2018](#) also sheds little light on how it is funded. Bearing this in this in mind, its reports must be viewed with a degree of scepticism.

The OfS starts piling on the pressure.

The OfS is currently at the start of a major review of reforming the university admissions. The [‘Consultation on the higher education admissions system in England’](#) was launched last week with a closing date of 21st May 2020. The aim is to develop "*Principles for a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system*". The government has made no secret of its opposition to ‘unconditional offers’ and there is some support for the idea of ‘post-qualification admissions’. This means that offers are made to students after the A-Level results are out. The consensus seems to be that less advantage students who get better grades than expected will be more likely to go to elite institutions (see Sutton Trust [‘Rules of the Game’ 2017](#)). A recent WONKHE article, [‘Admit two: OfS reviews university admissions’](#) has robustly challenged the aspirations of government by stressing the autonomy of universities with "*Any provider of higher education has the right to admit whatever students it would like to teach in any way it deems appropriate*". The idea that UCAS decides who is admitted centrally is quashed and reforming the system may simply lead to a clash with the universities exerting their autonomy.

Value for money, employment and ‘employability’.

This is now the government mantra. But it is naïve in that it seems to rely upon the idea of projected earnings for a student and not a wider concept of ‘value’. This might mean that capping numbers could emerge to focus the attention of errant universities with degrees thought to be ‘low value’. The much delayed [‘Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework \(TEF\)’](#) might also emerge soon and no doubt apply another spanner in the works. It was launched over 12 months ago and there is still little sign of it. Yet there is concern about so-called ‘low-quality degrees’ and ‘value for money’ that many believe should be addressed. The report last week from the Institute of Fiscal Studies for the Department for Education ([‘The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings’](#) and [data and methodology](#)) highlighted the dilemma that students face in their choices. It adds further stress to future planning by individual universities (see TEFS 28th February [2020 ‘Mentoring and finance for widening access offer some hope of success’](#)).

To earn money, it is obvious that students must get paid jobs. To be employed, it is assumed that they leave universities armed with ‘employability’ skills. A report by the [Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\)](#) (who are transparent in their funding) in 2015 [‘Employability: Degrees of Value’](#) provides a valuable lesson in not mixing up the acquisition of qualities of ‘employability’ with actual ‘employment’. Universities can, and should, work harder at adding skills that enhance ‘employability’, but they cannot fix or guarantee employment. This is still relevant today and is brought to the fore again in an excellent overview from HEPI this week [‘Getting on: graduate employment and its influence on UK higher education’](#). It seems that enhancing the employment prospects of graduates is already becoming much more important in university missions. However, this is not easily measured, and the article highlights that currently there are only *“existing metrics which measure levels of employment, rather than employability”*.

The main challenge for universities in the future will soon emerge and it will be a great one. Some are responding already with ideas and advice to engage with the government. The so-called [‘Million Plus’](#) institutions, that grandly claim they are *“the Association for Modern Universities in the UK, and the voice of 21st century higher education”*, are fighting back. They have produced a fascinating research report this week that hopefully will define their mission for the future in [‘Universities, devolution and the industrial strategy: piecing together the jigsaw Levelling up: investing in higher technical education at universities in England’](#). However, we wait to see if

the government takes the bait. In the meantime, we are becoming concerned that our political leaders are not equipped or educated to cope with the challenges that are mounting. The irony is that they may have the job but lack the 'employability' skills to do the job.

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