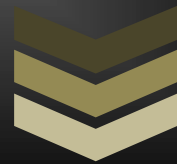


UNIVERSITY IN A TIME OF AUSTERITY

A personal view



Since Margaret Thatcher and John Major first began commoditising education, British universities have been driven through a rapid series of painful contortions and bizarre re-configurations of purpose. Large numbers of courses have closed, increasingly students complain they are not getting value for money, appeals over grading have risen massively and yet grade inflation has become a serious problem, and there are signs that graduate recruiters no longer have confidence in the degrees awarded. This article makes use of a number of published sources to consider the state of undergraduate education in the UK – particularly the subject of Creative Writing.

Carl Tighe

Over the last forty years – but particularly since 2010 - British universities have been driven through a series of painful contortions, bizarre and pointless re-configurations of purpose. While the ‘top’ universities (Oxbridge, the Russell Group and the older ‘redbrick’ universities) have avoided the worst of the unpleasantness, the post ‘92 universities have borne the brunt, alternately expanding to recruit students and part-time staff, and then abruptly contracting. And as fees climbed only the areas of science, technology, engineering and maths were deemed profitable; Arts and Humanities came under increasing commercial pressure and ‘unprofitable’ courses were simply axed. In the years 2006-12, approximately 27% of university courses - in Philosophy, History, English, German, French, American Studies, Film and TV, Classics, Law, Sociology, Politics, Economics, Geography, and even courses in Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Biology - were cut. (*Choice Cuts* 2012)

But the problems begin before university. The figures speak for themselves: the number of A-level grading appeals has risen massively from 189,950 in 2010 to 572,350 in 2015: the number of grades changed has risen from 34,800 to 90,650: 99% of the grades changed were moved upwards, and the bulk of the challenges related to B grades. (Coughlan, S. 10 December 2015) The relentlessly improbable rise in A-level grades is a certain indicator that university entrance is at stake and grade inflation at A-level has created problems for universities: is A the new C? The expectation was always that a student who achieved ‘good’ A-level results would be able to repeat that performance at university. That is no longer the case. A-levels no longer teach students how to study: instead they teach students how to pass tests, which is not good preparation for the kind of independent study students are expected to undertake at university.

University was traditionally a place for serious study, and until recently it was not part of a university’s role to make good the deficit left by the National Curriculum and A-levels. But given the drive to ‘widen participation’ we have to wonder: is a degree in fact the new A-level? Forcing universities to accommodate people who do not particularly want to study and who may not be well equipped for university level study was never a good

idea and there are consequences to recruiting students who struggle to learn. For university teachers over more than a decade, the increase in the number of students who do not quite know why they are at university has been as clear as the decline in the ability of newly arrived students. As a matter of course, post '92 universities now undertake a great deal of study-skills work to enable students with good A-level results to proceed at university level. And now, instead of progressive, linked and graded degree courses that challenge the intellect, paying student-customers are more likely to get a series of discrete, pre-digested, hard-to-fail, semester-ised, modular nuggets leading to a 'qualification'.

However, these changes have not been popular or successful and recent surveys show not only that the number of part-time and mature students has declined sharply, but also that one-third of students feel they are not getting 'value for money' from their university course. It is not surprising that we see an increase in student complaints as previously high-achieving A-level students run into the buffers and start to score less well at university. Consequently student complaints (usually about marking) are up to a record level of over 20,000 per year and still rising, and while the Office of the Independent Adjudicator has said only 5% of these complaints are actually justified, compensation payments to students now top £2 million per year. In 2015 rather than deal with the root causes of complaint, the capacity of universities to deal with student complaints was simply increased. (Coughlan 4 June 2015; Prynne 3 June 2014; Gurney-Read 18 June 2015)

At the same time we also see an increasing proportion of 'good degrees' awarded – now 71 percent of students get a 'good degree' compared to less than 10 percent in 2004. (Barrett 1 January 2011; Burns January 2015; HEUK Table E – HE Qualifiers by Level of Qualification Obtained, 2009-14) But just as university lecturers identified grade inflation at A-level as a problem for the performance of undergraduates, so firms seeking to recruit graduates have identified the problem of degree-inflation. There is now a movement to set aside degree results as criteria for recruitment: in September 2015 the accountancy firm Deloitte, in a move described as 'the latest in a wave of

changes by graduate recruiters wanting to look beyond academic results', announced they no longer required that applicants should have at least an upper second class degree, would not be concerned about which university candidates came from, and would not be revealing the academic background of candidates at interview. PricewaterhouseCoopers, who had already abandoned A-levels as criteria for recruitment, made a similar decision about degrees. And they were followed by Penguin Books who declared there was no longer any 'clear link between holding a degree and performance in a job'. It is clear the top graduate recruiters no longer trust the degree system. (Coughlan 29 September 2015: Coughlan 18 January 2016)

Even so, because 58.8% graduates – even those with a 'good degree' - can only get low-paid work, 45% of student loans are never repaid. This figure is perilously close to the 48.6% figure at which the system actually costs more than it earns, but in any case leaves the universities with a funding shortfall which the Treasury is currently forced to bridge. ('Most graduates in non-graduate jobs' 19 August 2015)

Has the massive rise of university tuition fees encouraged a belief in entitlement, rather than a desire for serious study? Has it encouraged a belief that study should be easy? A mentality where 'the customer is always right'? The educational climate now encourages students to believe they have 'paid for' a degree, rather than the opportunity to study; it encourages them to feel it is acceptable blame someone else for a poor performance, and it disguises a rapidly developing culture of under-achievement and grade inflation.

Setting targets, belief in league tables, surveying staff 'performance' and continually canvassing student opinion through 'customer led' surveys like the National Student Satisfaction Survey, websites like Rate My Lecturer and the recently announced Teaching Excellence Framework, are not effective ways to judge 'educational experience' or calculate 'value for money', and do not balance the reality of a student's engagement and participation, the actual use they have made of the opportunity for study, against their anonymous expressions of 'dissatisfaction'. In fact, rather than

encourage a realistic and responsible approach to study, these things are really just a kind of snitches' charter pandering to the unprepared and disaffected. They also encourage students (and university managements) to believe that teaching is a kind of popularity contest. The situation is not helped by the development of a university management culture increasingly dependent on 'performance related' bonuses earned through a combination of 'results' and 'satisfaction'. But dumping the problem on lecturers does not entirely hide it.

University used to be the place for a genuinely challenging educational experience, the place to try new things, to see what could be achieved. Even now serious students do not shrivel up in the face of a challenge and they are not irreparably damaged when things they try go wrong; serious students adjust to the demands of a different style of learning, find out what they can achieve in overcoming their problems, benefit and grow from the encounter with demanding forms of culture and challenging educational experiences. They also grow by finding ways to make use of transferrable skills. The benefits of a growing command of writing, the development of research skills, a sense of personal discipline and a growing mastery of independent learning all indicate a trained mind and some application, but they cannot easily be quantified in terms of 'student satisfaction', employability or enhanced earning power. That does not mean the benefits do not exist: but treating a degree as a 'qualification' is certainly a mistake.

Fees from 'home' students barely cover the costs of teaching, and universities are coming under increasing pressure to fill non-teaching weeks (Christmas, Easter, the summer, periods when academics normally do their reading, research and preparation) with additional student activities in order to justify fees. But as fees have increased so British students have begun to look to Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia for their degree - in 2015 it was reported that in Netherlands alone, where university study costs 2,000 euros (£1,400) per year instead of £9000 per year, some 2,600 UK students were registered for degree courses. (Coughlan 3 December 2015).

But less is to be expected from overseas students too. Not only has the Border Authority made entry to the UK much more difficult, but for those who can get in, government budgeting indicates a trend away from universities: spending on grants and loans to foreign students has gone increasingly to those who want to attend 'alternative higher education providers' – like the London School of Business and Finance, part of the gigantic Global University Systems, which runs several institutions in the UK, Asia and North America - rather than universities: funds to these students rocketed from £50 million in 2010 to £675 million in 2013. ('Millions in Taxpayers' Money owed by Foreign Students' 22 August 2015)

Dare we acknowledge all this as a race to the bottom? Are swathes of the university system now simply a part of an attempt to corral large numbers of young people into 'education' and get them to pay for the privilege instead of having them claim unemployment benefits? Is university now a part of dole management – a kind of *South Park* on stilts?

In spite of the obvious problems, government ministers, Treasury officials, educational advisers and university managements are extremely reluctant to acknowledge even the most obvious criticisms. (For example: Brown & Carasso 2013 or McGettigan 2013) They cannot publicly acknowledge that in Higher Education, marketization is no guarantee of anything - quality, standards, research, teaching careers, education, 'satisfaction', employment, profits, still less the survival of Arts and Humanities subjects, or even the survival of all the universities currently in existence. That is why universities have begun to think about mergers to gain economies of scale in staffing and provision. (Scott 2014) It is also why universities have become much more slick in presenting themselves in the 'market place': they now concentrate on their 'brand image' with a massive proliferation in snazzy web-pages, jingles, slogans, mottos, eye-catching logos, t-shirts, laptops, tablets, badges and corporate screensavers. So far no university has admitted employing spin-doctors and they have avoided setting up 'customer relations' departments, but most universities now invest a substantial slice of their budget in marketing, publicity and 'competition'.

British universities clearly cannot expect stability in funding from teaching any time soon. But it seems increasingly likely that in future English universities will rely much less on actual teaching. They will almost certainly outsource teaching to agencies who in order to maximise profits will abandon face-to-face contact in favour of the virtual world of mass on-line courses; agency lecturers will only conduct research where they can secure external funding; the agencies will buy-in whatever research expertise they need. Instead universities will concentrate on horizontal diversification; they will offer themselves as venues for corporate events; they will specialise in hiring out their 'assets' – consultancies, educational services, teaching staff on secondment (at a price) to high-paying overseas universities; they will also open 'branch' campuses - Cyprus, Sri Lanka, China, India, Thailand and Malaysia are the currently favoured spots; universities will act as commercial repositories, commoditising the products of the mind by claiming rights in 'educational derivatives' (intellectual assets, copyright, digital rights to the exploitation of teaching materials, ownership of research and research archives, licensing and developing the commercial potential of research materials); and we will see the universities continue to develop their real estate holdings.

Eventually the façade will drop away: universities, relieved of their charitable status, will stand revealed as the corporate enterprises most lecturers already know them to be; Vice-Chancellors will acknowledge (as their level of pay already indicates) they are, in fact, CEOs of struggling middle sized companies. How long before universities float their shares on the stock exchange and declare a dividend? You don't need to be a writer of fiction to see it can only be a matter of time...

UK Universities are no longer the engine of social change, class mobility or economic improvement they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Government disinvestment in universities was not exactly industrial asset stripping except in that it took away Higher Education from public ownership and privatised it, subjecting it to the vagaries of the market place. Recruiting those willing to pay rather than those who actually want to study was not really widening participation; abolishing grants, raising fees and removing

caps to recruitment was not a genuine expansion of Higher Education. This could hardly be described as 'future-proofing'. Nor was it an investment in the future. Many English universities – probably the majority - far from being an ivory tower, a cloister, a grove of academe or any other cliché from times gone by, have become places of intense uncertainty, instability, panic management, bullying and stress. And the reason is that in spite of its unsuitability, education is now a business with 'customers' just like any other. The marketization of the universities and the commoditisation of educational opportunities have produced Education for Hire rather than Higher Education.

Bean-counters and bread-heads have always menaced education, the arts and the life of the mind by trying to put a monetary value on experience. However, as Albert Einstein said: 'Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.' Even so, the experience of the last thirty years leaves us with awkward questions about the political culture that has driven these changes. The creation of student debt in an era shaped by the 'Credit Crisis' and the astronomical bills left by bailing out collapsing banks - is a rather ambiguous learning example to set before young people. Creating 'qualified' graduates for graduate-level jobs that do not exist is also questionable. However, what has been done to Higher Education was not achieved through stealth but with the connivance of a vast cohort of government ministers, civil servants, bankers and advisers, hordes of Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Assistant Deans, managers and accountants in the full light of day, under Conservative, Labour and Coalition governments. And the changes have been pushed through against the advice of university teachers. Perhaps the most important point to make is that these changes were effected by politicians who understood that the British electorate is profoundly indifferent to anything concerning universities.

The demolition has not been particularly rapid, but it has been accomplished with astonishing ease. Although for the moment Oxbridge, the Russell Group and a handful of 'redbrick' universities maintain their reputations, for the rest the transformation from serious educational establishment into poorly functioning factories producing degrees is almost complete. And there is no going back. These things are incredibly difficult to

repair, almost impossible to undo, and as there are no votes in it future governments (of all stripes) will probably be very reluctant to even try.

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Where does this leave Creative Writing as a university subject? Has the corporatisation of the universities and the commoditisation of education been aided by the cynical introduction of an apparently undemanding (and therefore popular) subject called Creative Writing? Did this happen at the same time as a sudden drop in applications from part-timers and mature students, and at the same time as a widespread decline in literacy among young adults and school leavers and a steady disengagement with public culture in favour of the private worlds of the internet chat-room and social media? By teaching Creative Writing are we allowing students to noodle along in the deluded belief that their writing has some value? What are the chances their writing will ever earn them a decent income? Are we, in fact, depriving them of future earning potential? Hungry minds need solid intellectual food, but with the growth of Creative Writing, is it simply the case that universities cynically plugged into the acceptable face of 'celebrity culture', hoovering-up weak-minded, un-academic wannabes? By teaching Creative Writing are we depriving students of contact with the best that has been thought and said, leaving them in ignorance of the more demanding cultural and educational experiences that a degree in a traditional academic subject would give?

Creative Writing seems to offer access to almost everyone, and for many it has proved to be a genuine educational opportunity. The idea of 'widening participation' has its attractions, particularly in contrast to the privileged education of elites. But in the world of culture and the creative arts there is no such thing as widening participation. Creativity may be available to all for passive consumption, but the practice of the arts is not democratic and massaging fragile egos is not providing a challenging educational experience for all. A degree is a snapshot of a developing mind, but culture is what culture does (in spite of the difficulties), and it does not 'widen participation'. Not everybody wants to create or be an 'artist'; not everyone has the talent; many are indifferent to most art forms; and not many can stand the insecurity of 'the writing life'. In general when it comes to art of any kind, we view it, but don't do it. To a certain extent

putting Creative Writing into universities flies in the face of this lived experience. However, writing is a subject like any other and it can be studied. And studying with a view to writing professionally is really a sensible way to avoid paying quite so much 'beginner's tax' as the new writer explores the painful world of the arts. Surely that cannot be a bad thing.

Oddly, the funding chaos of the last twenty-five years has been a Golden Age for Creative Writing – indeed the rise of the subject has been one of the few positive developments. For a while universities used it to bulk-out combined degree courses and cross-fund the less popular subjects, and the surprise is that in spite of the disappearance of numerous academic subjects virtually all of the university creative writing courses have survived. Even those that have gone – for example Cardiff University - did so because of management incompetence rather than failure of popularity. Nevertheless articles in the press have revealed some of the pressures on Creative Writing at university. Marina Warner, for example, smarting from shoddy treatment at Essex, said the relentless pursuit of 'value for money' has had an entirely negative impact on teaching and research quality. (Warner 2014; Warner 2015) A petulant Hanif Kureishi questioned the value of Creative Writing degrees, saying 99.9% of his students lacked the talent to become writers. (Kureishi 2014) The fact that so many Creative Writing courses have survived is heartening, but in this climate we might feel justifiable concern at where 'customer whim' will lead next; and serious students will almost certainly wonder whether a course in Creative Writing is really a good idea, whether they might be going into serious debt, lumbering themselves with a third-rate 'qualification', they are doing this for a job that does not exist, and curtailing their future earning power. But they should be asking these questions whatever subject they choose.

University used to be the place for a genuinely challenging educational experience, the place to try new things, to see what we could achieve. Even now serious students do not shrivel up in the face of a challenge and they are not irreparably damaged when things they try go wrong; serious students find out what they can achieve in spite of their

problems, benefit and grow from the encounter with demanding forms of culture and challenging educational experiences. They also grow by finding ways to make use of transferrable skills. Treating a degree in Creative Writing as a 'qualification' is certainly mistaken, as is the expectation that graduates will necessarily become writers - do we ask how many graduates from American Studies go on to become cowboys, or how many graduates from English become Renaissance dramatists? The benefits of a growing command of writing skills, a sense of personal discipline and a developing appreciation of creativity cannot easily be quantified in terms of 'student satisfaction', employability or enhanced earning power. But that does not mean the benefits do not exist.

Students who 'just want a degree' are normal and their desire is ordinary and sensible; but students with a serious hunger for learning, a serious engagement with culture and a desire to create will always be in a minority: the people who actually go on to create cultural artefacts for a living (artists, musicians, composers, writers) are in an even smaller minority. These people are not ordinary, they are extraordinary. In all areas of study universities cater for both the ordinary and the extraordinary; both will have their minds 'trained' by their degree. But academic success does not necessarily mean artistic success: a degree in Creative Writing is not a qualification for publication or for a literary career. In Creative Writing one student will score higher than another and may go on to write new works, but then again, maybe not. A student may not do so well in their degree, but still go on to write successfully. Usually talent, persistence and the market decide, rather than the degree result. In spite of that alluringly fuzzy word 'creative' in its title, the subject imparts a sense of professional discipline to all those who study it. Apart from that, the jobs market is increasingly alert to the value of this subject and Creative Writing graduates do exceptionally well in finding jobs simply because of the many transferrable skills the subject teaches and the fact that graduates from Creative Writing can, unlike many graduates from traditional subjects now, do what it says on their degree certificate: write. But in spite of its success, Creative Writing is still a part of the degree factory system. We may have already seen the golden years for this subject.

Taken together these truths may just be too indecent to discuss. In the winter of 2015-16 this article was offered to: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, *The London Review of Books* and *The New Statesman*. It was published by none.

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