
The university library of the future

**SCONUL autumn conference
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Conference Centre**

Panel session: What will UK HE look like in 2021?



Panel members Brian Hipkin, Caroline Dangerfield, Caroline Gipps and Christopher Hale

Four experts outlined their views on the future shape of UK higher education and responded to questions from the delegates. The panel members were:

Professor Caroline Gipps, Member of the Diamond Review on higher education efficiency and former Vice-Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

Brian Hipkin, Dean of Students, Regent's College London

Christopher Hale, Deputy Director of Policy, Universities UK

Caroline Dangerfield, University of Salford Students' Union and member of the National Union of Students (NUS) Higher Education zone committee

Caroline Gipps looked at the university system as a whole, arguing that it is made up of an 'ecosystem' with the parts in balance. The impact of the current changes may be to disturb one part of that ecosystem with unknown, possibly unintended consequences. One obvious change may be stratification, with a gulf developing between the elite universities pushing for higher fees and other

institutions introducing lower fees to bid for more students. This could result in very different sums of money being spent on students in different institutions. Caroline recognised that changes had to be made to the UK higher education system but argued that the speed with which all the costs had landed on students and their families in England has been far too sudden. In the future there may be more advanced apprenticeships and other routes into the professions, but these are not yet available and this may have a detrimental impact on social mobility. Other OECD countries, China and India are investing in quality to promote social mobility but the UK seems to be moving in a different direction, with social class still a strong influence on success at school and in higher education and limited chances in our economy to move up the scale. It is a concern for universities that students from disadvantaged families may not feel able to apply. It is possible that there may be a two-tier provision in the UK like the pre-1992 university system, with other more flexible provision from distance-learning or two-year degree courses providing new competition. This will not just be a public/private sector divide as some of the private institutions are not cheap and others like Regent's College are offering something very different.

Caroline Dangerfield consulted colleagues in the NUS to help provide the student view of the future higher education landscape. They predict that in 2021 there will be fewer universities in the UK as a result of mergers and some closures in the 'squeezed middle'. Universities will be increasingly divergent, with the large research institutions attended mainly by 18-25 year-olds from middle-class backgrounds, and other institutions providing cheap, flexible degrees with none of the traditional university facilities, and catering for part-time and mature students. Further Education colleges will offer higher education qualifications at a lower cost. Again, this raises concern about social mobility and it will be necessary to facilitate access to professional networks. Students will demand more information to help them make choices, such as league-table position, employability scores, timetabling in advance, access to resources, the quality of courses and contact hours. In the past a university degree was seen as a 'golden ticket' to a career, but it is now less valuable in this respect and students will make very careful decisions about whether to enter higher education at all. Caroline put forward interesting views about teaching and learning, arguing that 'learning' will not change much, but information-seeking behaviour will. She anticipates that

lectures, seminars and exams will remain but that all course materials and lecture notes must be made available online and that new forms of research such as crowdsourcing¹ will sit alongside peer review. Technology and the economy will be the main drivers for change, but it is essential to maintain high quality education whatever the external environment. Getting the fundamentals right is more important than following the latest predictions about technology, given that the forecasts for 2011 have turned out to be pretty poor: robots have not taken over routine tasks and housework but most of us have mobile access to the internet on our phones, which was certainly not on anyone's radar twenty years ago.

Brian Hipkin looked back to the headlines in *Times Higher Education* in 2001, finding that the key issues of the day were very similar to those of the present: cash, clusters and concerns about admissions, demonstrating that in fact we always live in uncertain times. He provided an alternative analogy for the structure of the higher education system – a beautiful piece of Victorian engineering with all the pieces interacting but not in a very organic way. He argued that UK higher education is built on a value hierarchy of silos: research, teaching and administration. There is value attached to each of these activities and it is within the silos that we will experience change at a local level. It is possible that we are over-exaggerating the importance of the big landscape, which is easily over-analysed. Change happens through a balance of serendipity and opportunity, the majority of change being serendipitous rather than brought about by strategic drivers. In Brian's view, when we look back we will realise that we got the concept of 'students as customers' very wrong. We cannot compare students to the consumer on the high street, as they do not have the same product experience and knowledge on which to base their decisions. Students from the internet generation will expect instant availability of everything, continual communication and virtual communities creating a sense of identity. Brian does not believe that the private sector will take over, that universities will go bankrupt or that further education will have the resources to expand provision. What he does think will happen is that technology will be unrecognisable in 2021, agreeing with Caroline that learning as a human function will not change but that the means of delivery will. Less and less time will be spent on campuses, and the student experience will be defined by interactions via technology rather than in buildings. The government restrictions on visas will restrict growth, and a major

challenge will be the delivery of the higher education experience outside the host country in other cultures. Libraries will be winners in the new era, retaining the biggest buildings and bringing advice services together in converged models.

The final panellist, Chris Hale, agreed that change is likely to be incremental and evolutionary, not with big headlines. It will be driven by the fiscal environment but also by the current Government desire for competition, efficiency, value for money and transparency. Students will become 'co-producers' rather than customers, contributing to their own success. The emerging regulatory landscape aims to maintain quality and high standards. In the medium term there may well be a dispersal of pricing through variable fees, which may have significant implications. A greater polarity of higher education providers may accelerate changes in relationships, for example more mergers and collaborations, shared services and managing costs in a competitive environment, possibly resulting in more collaboration at the front end, for example in teaching provision. There is a role for the major agencies such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Universities UK (UUK) and SCONUL leading change in a more deregulated sector. Even in a more competitive environment there will be many opportunities for sharing in the non-competitive areas. We still need to keep an eye on macroeconomic factors such as unemployment and European Union growth, as there will be more pressure on public services in an uncertain fiscal environment.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION: SHARED SERVICES

Sara Marsh, University of Bradford, congratulated the panel on an excellent set of contributions which provided much food for thought. Her question to the panel members concerned shared services: where institutions are not in direct competition but part of a local ecosystem, will they be more likely to want to share services at this local level rather than with other members of their mission group? Brian Hipkin responded that the extent to which competition is coming to the sector will force a change in traditional values such as collegiality. Local shared services based on knowing each other may well be very viable, and these may go beyond the local if big providers such as Capita come into the market and services such as cloud computing develop. Shared services are more likely to evolve in areas such as IT provision, where the cost and value of services can be well understood. Caroline Gipps described an example where the question of shared services

had been explored across the universities and the city in Birmingham, but there was too much difference between the potential partners and the time and cost in restructuring would have been too great. With the drive for efficiencies coming from the Diamond report² we shall need to look at different ways of working in areas where we share the same issues, but recognise that these may present a threat to internal teams. Chris Hale felt that regional or local cooperation was likely to be more successful than mission group sharing; one of the main recommendations in the Diamond report is to bring together regional consortia. Caroline Dangerfield felt that students will not mind how things are done in the background but that they will appreciate cost savings. Student Unions are increasingly working together on issues such as financial management and office functions and the NUS purchasing consortium has proved to be effective. Stephen Pinfield, University of Nottingham, commented that some shared services such as JANET are already very good. Universities may also want to emphasise increased internal efficiencies, for example standardising IT provision so that it will be cloud-ready. The leaning-up of processes could deliver benefits with no adverse impact and with potentially beneficial effects on students. Academic freedom and administrative freedom should not be confused. John Tuck, Royal Holloway University, agreed that there are many successful achievements in regional consortia and that there is expertise to draw on.

SERENDIPITY OR STRATEGY?

Rosemary Lynch, University of the Creative Arts, asked the panel for their views on the serendipity of change: should we simply abandon strategy? The appreciative laughter round the auditorium indicated that this might be a very popular option. Caroline Gipps believes that we do have to strategise but also to take the serendipitous opportunities as they arise. Streamlining and business process review must take place before we look at outsourcing or sharing services. Many academic staff are anxious about centralisation, for example of the academic timetable: we must persuade them that centralisation could mean freedom not to teach on Mondays or Fridays! Caroline Dangerfield agreed that there has to be both an over-arching plan and the opportunity to make a personal impact. If there are worries about centralisation we should look at the impact of efficiencies on students, and all change needs to be tightly managed. Brian Hipkin commented that the drivers for shared services were now cruder than previously, more geared towards cutting costs than, for example, expanding access to resources. We

need to define the student experience and protect it. When senior managers are new in post, there is an opportunity to look at the existing processes and, in Brian's view, the rejection of centralisation has led to duplication in some areas. At the heart of efficiencies should be an understanding of the student life-cycle, teaching and research. For example, many university websites are organised by administrative unit which has little meaning for students. Failure to take into account how students interact with us will be very damaging. Chris Hale picked up on the Diamond report's emphasis on efficiencies – we need data on and an understanding of costs so that we can undertake effective benchmarking.

NOTES

- 1 **Crowdsourcing:** the act of sourcing tasks traditionally performed by specific individuals to a group of people or community (crowd) through an open call.
Definition from Wikipedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing>>, accessed 12.1.12
- 2 **Diamond, Ian,** *Efficiency and effectiveness in higher education: A report by the Universities UK Efficiency and Modernisation Task Group.* London: Universities UK, 2011