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Who are universities for?

Research is important — but serving the needs and desires of students matters more

THE CRITIC ESSAY

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This essay was initially spurred by reading a [recent article for *The Critic*](#) in which Alexandra Wilson argues for the central role of research in academic life. Whilst in essence sympathetic to the broad thrust of Wilson's arguments, I believe they require some nuancing in the context of an expanded UK Higher Education sector such as has grown in the last 3 decades, and so wish to elaborate on fundamental issues relating to institutions, departments and courses and their sustainability, the types of individuals best able to teach these, presented in the context of the historical development of the sector.

Wilson asks in her article whether a university is “simply an extension of school? Three more years in sixth form, doing slightly harder work? Or is it an FE [Further Education] college with pretensions? A finishing school even?” While I can agree with her that “a university isn't — or shouldn't be — any of these things”, I can certainly think not only of institutions or departments which fit each of these categories, but also those which fit neither any of them nor her preferred type of university. Furthermore, not all of those employed in academic positions are best suited to the latter type of environment.

The key question is whether the classical model of the university is feasible in order to deliver what is, relatively speaking, a form of mass rather than elite education, in the context of the United Kingdom, in which it has been the case for a decade that [around 50 per cent of people go into higher education](#), compared to around 20 per cent when I was a student in the mid-1980s, and just 3.4 per cent in 1950. In particular, since the [1992 Further and Higher Education Act](#), many former polytechnics and other institutions have attained university status, more recently joined by an increasing number of private providers (designated “[alternative education providers](#)” by the government).

Wilson argues that while one can encounter, amongst teachers at the best independent schools, individuals of a comparable intellectual calibre to research academics, nonetheless the lack of compulsion to undertake research is a crucial difference. Then she posits a model of tertiary education whereby academics undertake research and their teaching is based upon this, so that in general students are being taught by experts in the areas they study.

Wilson also notes how before 1992, polytechnics placed less of a premium on research, but with the transformation of most of them into universities, this has changed in some of the most ambitious such institutions, due to the possibilities provided by the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

But the following passage from the article is especially problematic:

Since there is no national curriculum in higher education, a prospective student should do their homework in choosing a university, since the teaching they receive – in humanities subjects at least – will often be geared towards the particular research interests of the academics employed there. And these academics then train students to do research of their own.

I do believe there is an argument for some type of tertiary national curriculum, together with guaranteed provision of core subjects in all regions, to ensure all students have similar opportunities available. To some extent subject benchmarks do fulfil this role — though they can be somewhat vague and non-specific, and are currently in a state of flux due to the transfer of powers from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to the Office for Students (OfS).

More fundamentally, the model of research and teaching presented by Wilson is essentially the influential model developed by architect of educational reform Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). It is to Humboldt that we owe the concept of “Einheit von Lehre und Forschung” (unity of teaching and research), which is at the heart of the research university. Humboldt wrote that ‘the teacher does not exist for the sake of the student; both teacher and student have their justification in the common pursuit of knowledge’. He drew upon the ideas of philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who like Humboldt saw the professor as a model for the student to follow rather than simply a teacher.

The term “university” has been used in a flexible manner for centuries, and institutions across Europe have developed significantly with respect to their governance, financial basis, types of degrees and subjects offered, approach to teaching, not to mention commitment to religious or humanist ideals. Overall, Germany led the way in the nineteenth century, with varieties of the Humboldt model becoming dominant in much of Europe and the United States, superseding a rival Napoleonic model of specialised schools from France.

However, as the historian of the European university Walter Rüegg has noted, from the late eighteenth century onwards in Europe other types of higher education institutions developed, with a focus on practical rather than academic teaching, in military, technical, commercial, medical, agricultural, education, musical and other fields. As late as the 1930s, nonetheless, these were still institutions for a minority of students compared to the 200 universities in the continent. Some of the former managed to gain university status in Germany and Austria, while in the United Kingdom and Italy they became universities or were assimilated into existing institutions.

In the United Kingdom, professional training was introduced into Scottish universities in the nineteenth century. Oxford and Cambridge were unsurprisingly the institutions which adhered most closely to the Humboldt model during this period and resisted a move towards education for the professions for some time.

The most significant reforms of higher education in Western Europe took place from the 1950s ([when only around 5 per cent of young people across the continent went to university](#)) onwards. Many new institutions were founded in order to expand provision and enhance competitiveness relative to the United States and Soviet Union. Such phenomena as the student revolts of 1968 should be viewed relative to the growth of a new student population. From the 1960s these included British polytechnics, French *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie* and German *Fachhochschulen*. Very slightly earlier, between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, a series of ten [Colleges of Advanced Technology](#) (CATs) were founded in England and Wales (with a few counterparts in Scotland), generally building upon earlier technical colleges. Overall, technical and technologically focused institutions grew in the Western world especially [during the period following the launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957](#), stoking the technological competition that was an integral part of the Cold War. [Student numbers rocketed between the 1950s and 1990s](#) — by a factor of nine in West Germany and the United Kingdom, eight in France, and six in Greece, Italy and Austria.

In the United Kingdom, following the recommendations of the [Robbins Report of 1963](#), the CATs became full universities — Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunel, City, Loughborough, Salford and Surrey — or were absorbed into existing institutions (Chelsea CAT into King's College, London, and the Welsh CAT into the University of Wales, later Cardiff University). A similar process occurred with technology focused-institutions in Aberdeen (into Robert Gordon's University), Dundee and Glasgow (into the University of Strathclyde). As for the polytechnics, following [some recommendations in an important 1968 book by Eric Robinson](#), they broadened from a technological and vocational focus to encompass business studies, social sciences and the arts, and then various humanities courses, many of which proved cheaper to provide than expensive science and technology. It is at least arguable ([and has been argued in the case of the CATs](#)) that an opportunity to develop world-leading science and technology institutes was lost through these dual developments, which led to a diffusion of identity on the part of both sets of institutions. The 1992 Act, and the subsequent transformation of polytechnics and other institutions into universities, blurred distinctions yet further. Of remaining technology-centred institutions, [Loughborough University dropped the suffix 'of Technology' in 1996](#), and [the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology \(UMIST\) merged with the Victoria University of Manchester to become the present-day University of Manchester in 2004](#).

The funding system in the United Kingdom was also distinct from that in various other European countries, with universities competing for government finance on the basis of development plans. Cuts in the 1980s forced institutions to make various economies, and from 2012 [direct public funding for tuition was ended, with institutions now raising this directly through increased tuition fees](#), albeit with a statutory government loan system in place.

It is hard to imagine this fundamental shift being undone in the current difficult economic times, with all major political parties reluctant to commit to significantly increased direct government spending on higher education. There is nonetheless today something of a crisis in UK higher education. [Fees have been frozen at £9250 since 2017](#), meaning a loss in real-terms income every year. Conservative politicians have

[ruled out any fee increase](#) during the cost-of-living crisis, while the Labour Party have said that [they will look again at the student fees system](#), but few details have yet been forthcoming. Following both Brexit and new restrictions on visas and those for dependents, [international student numbers have fallen drastically](#), depriving institutions of major sources of income.

At the time of writing, since a year ago, redundancies have been implemented or are being negotiated in the universities of [Huddersfield](#), [Sheffield Hallam](#), [Surrey](#), [Winchester](#), [Portsmouth](#), [Brighton](#), [East Anglia](#), [Staffordshire](#), [Coventry](#), [Oxford Brookes](#), [Northumbria](#), [Aberdeen](#), [Highlands and Islands](#), [Queen Mary](#), [Goldsmiths and SOAS](#), and there are serious threats of the same at the universities of [Kent](#), [Lincoln](#) and [South Wales](#). There are many suggestions that the same fate will befall academics at other institutions in the near future, with [40 per cent of institutions making losses](#). Arts and humanities courses are under particular threat, as [students are increasingly turning away from these disciplines towards other options](#). These figures should nonetheless be balanced against [Higher Education Standards Authority \(HESA\) figures which show a net increase in academic staff across the sector of around 12K between 2017-18 and 2020-21](#), though it is possible that the tide may have turned since then, the period which has seen the implementation of Brexit and new visa laws.

It is clear that, unless a new government develops a major new funding stream for universities, there will need to be major changes and adaptations if the tide of cuts and redundancies is to be halted. Two years ago, following the end of the COVID-19 lockdown and the necessary experience garnered of online delivery, there was talk about [a shift to a greater amount of online learning overall](#), which could save considerably on costs. Data on student views of this is mixed, with [evidence from a Jisc survey that many find it convenient, yet still overwhelmingly prefer in-person teaching](#). The University of Reading [has announced a new partnership to offer a range of part-time online taught postgraduate courses](#), but so far this is a relatively rare example.

With respect to adaptation, I believe the Humboldtian model advocated above by Wilson is not sustainable across the whole sector. One reason is that academics increasingly undertake extremely specialised micro-research (in part because the REF and the funding councils tend to favour it), some of which can appear esoteric even to other academics within the same broad disciplinary areas. [A very significant amount of published research is never cited by others](#), especially in the arts, and it is hard not to see some of it as primarily a box-ticking exercise. Curricula organised around these research interests would be highly atomised and often have little coherence, certainly in subjects for which students arrive with extremely variable prior skills. A priority has to be strengthening such skills, by means of core so-called “service” teaching. Teaching derived from research may not be the optimal means to provide such students with the nuts and bolts they need.

A clear distinction between “service” and “research-led” teaching is only really sustainable with vast and thus hugely expensive faculties. In broad disciplines, including many arts, humanities and social sciences, delivery of a comprehensive curriculum is only possible with flexible academics prepared to teach outside of their own area of expertise. Experts on HE teaching with whom I have consulted while

taking leadership roles myself have commented that many academics think of their teaching primarily in terms of *content*, rather than *teaching skills*. I do believe that with good teaching skills, many academics can potentially deliver a relatively wide range of content at core undergraduate level. And to some extent the balance between this and research allowance may need recalibrating. Academics in the arts and humanities who, as one Head of Department related to me, are indignant at the idea of teaching more than 3-4 hours per week, because they need the rest of it for “deep thoughts”, need to think again.

Wilson notes how “Some of the newer universities ... appear to be aspiring to return to their pre-92 roots”, which she identifies as entailing “concentrating on vocational subjects and having staff in the classroom most of the week, delivering other people’s ‘content’.” She notes the value of the “practical skills” this form of teaching allows but asks if what they receive amounts to an academic degree?

My own experience, having taught in two Russell Group institutions, one mid-ranking and post-92, an arts college and a conservatoire, whilst maintaining regular contact with many others teaching across the sector, makes me question the feasibility of this narrower conception of an ‘academic degree’ for the broad and diverse range of students who now enrol in higher education. This is not however to deny the possibility that such students can successfully undertake degree-level learning, but that the concept of a ‘degree’ has to be framed more broadly than it was when it catered only to a relatively small elite.

Practical skills have long been integrated into a wide range of disciplines, including numerous applied sciences, engineering, computer science, law, business, medicine, psychology and the creative and performing arts (I have elsewhere [outlined in some detail](#) how a shift from primarily practically-focused to humanities-centred education in music in the United Kingdom is a relatively recent and perhaps short-lived phenomenon). In some cases teaching of these areas can be integrated with more theoretical and critical perspectives without requiring a clear separation; in others this is more difficult, with particular specialist teaching required, so that the type of flexibility I describe above may not be possible.

It is widely recognised that those teaching foreign-language skills need to have fluency in the relevant languages themselves — it is unrealistic that many could claim this for more than a few languages, so multiple teachers are required. Similarly, those teaching different musical instruments or the voice need to be able to demonstrate a high level of competence in those themselves, invariably the product of a long period of sustained training, as do those teaching dance. The same can be argued for certain types of studio skills, fluency in very different legal systems, and other focused skills.

Whilst such skills do not always constitute the total requirements of tertiary level education, they can often be a significant component. What is needed from those who teach them are by no means necessarily the same as, or even necessarily concomitant with, the skills associated with one who has undertaken research at doctoral or postdoctoral level. And in some cases, the most valuable teachers of certain skills may not be career academics but those with experience as active professional practitioners, and who might often best combine continuing work in this capacity with university teaching.

These possibilities, recurrent concerns at my own institution, City, University of London (from 1 August 2024 [City St George's](#)), whose tagline is “[the University for business, practice and the professions](#)”, do raise questions about conventional routes into academic work and the criteria for recruitment and promotion of those who do so. The standard indicator of both a propensity to undertake advanced research and the ability to teach in a university has long been the doctoral degree. Germany, and other continental countries whose higher education has been influenced by Germany, also often require the *Habilitation*, which amounts roughly to a second doctorate in a distinct sub-disciplinary area. But such requirements, as well as freezing out from positions academics from countries where the *Habilitation* is not required, can also limit the scope of non-Humboldtian institutions to employ those with skills and de facto qualifications garnered through experience in professional fields – in which category can fall lawyers, business people and politicians as well as artists and scientists.

One response to this need in the UK has been the gradual expansion of the definition of research *outputs* (including those required for doctoral degrees) beyond the traditional thesis, most radically to entertain the conception that research can be embodied *within* practice (practice-as-research), though in most cases (including for the REF) it is generally assumed that at least [some brief verbal explication of this is needed](#) for others to be able to gauge its quality. Having [written in strong defence of the concept of practice-as-research in a musical context](#), I continue to believe in this, but [identify problems with its being used as a fundamental requirement for those working in universities](#). Practice-research (the broader umbrella term for most types of research which include a practical component) tends to favour particular types of work — in the arts, it is often that which is experimental, highly technologically focused or linked to elaborate theoretical or systematic frameworks. This tends to exclude many practitioners working in more mainstream or commercially-oriented fields, [whose expertise often coincides most closely with the interests and aspirations of students](#). Judging the majority of practice by the use of models which, for all the well-intentioned nuances added over a period of time, are ultimately designed for assessing scientific work, can feel like forcing a square peg into a round hole, and is not the optimal means to integrate practitioners into academia.

It is not difficult to convince the layperson of the importance of research into certain areas, especially medical and psychological research, but also various forms of science, engineering and technology, and perhaps also areas of law and some social sciences. With respect to the arts and humanities, the case is not made so easily, and such arguments are not often made in a convincing form for the general public. Some academics will respond haughtily if asked to articulate such a justification, just as [many resisted the introduction of an “Impact” component to research assessment](#) at the tail end of the last Labour government. An argument for conceiving research impact more in the *long-term*, later than is allowed for by research assessment exercises, is coherent, but that for highly specialised readings of cultural texts, or production of obscure creative artistic work which often sinks without trace following a REF cycle, the argument for impact is not easy to make for either the short- or long-term. The possibility of developing different models of research for different families of disciplines, and consequently rethinking the relationship between such research and teaching, also warrants consideration. Beyond, the extent of provision of different

disciplines across the sector cannot be wholly taken for granted (this is a distinct point to that made earlier about the need for a range of subjects to be provided in most *regions*). There are plenty with aptitude to undertake university education, but not necessarily for the particular type of intensive critical thought associated with the humanities and some parts of the social sciences; the decline of the more rigorous methods once associated with these disciplinary areas, has left a void which alas has made them prone to take-over by those who wish to hijack education for [the purposes of political activism and ideological indoctrination](#). Whether courses which have descended to this level are worth preserving is something of which I am far from convinced.

Those who came into academia via conventional routes have often had opportunities to develop not only teaching skills but also understanding of personal tutoring, module and programme design and sensitivities towards the needs of modern students, especially those with particular needs. As early-career academics they will learn a whole range of administrative skills and general cognisance of the workings of universities. Those coming ‘cold’ into working in a university need proper induction and training in these things, if an unfair two-tier system is to be avoided, in which practitioner academics are relieved of the need to undertake most of these duties. Furthermore, many such practitioners will lack familiarity with wider values which I believe are vital in all academic institutions, including critical thinking, dispassionate analysis of subjects even where one has a personal stake, and academic freedom.

With this in mind, I have proposed [a statutory qualification for practitioners working in higher education](#), broader than existing teaching qualifications such as the PGCHE. This could be an alternative to the doctoral degree. Beyond, ongoing engagement with practice needs to be respected as an alternative to undertaking research in the conventional sense, and promotion pathways adopted accordingly (as has already occurred at City). Similar strategies can also be used to enable those from non-standard routes into academia to be placed on full salaried rather than just hourly-paid contracts. Practitioners can at present only bring in research income to a UK institution via the usual means of the REF and funding bodies; [wider frameworks for assessing other types of practice would be ideal](#), though would require significant shifts in government policy.

Nonetheless, it remains vital that institutions continue to employ those engaged in research as more typically defined. However the concept of “research-led teaching” can be broadened. Rather than referring exclusively to teaching which derives directly from research undertaken by the academic delivering the teaching, it can simply draw upon the most up-to-date research available, and reflect the wider “transferable research skills” of the academic, even if the teaching occupies a different sub-disciplinary area to that on which they are or have been engaged.

There is no reason to view “vocational” study as of lesser value than other disciplines, and some such study is far from absent in some disciplines, including medical and psychological subjects, which are taught at the most elite institutions. It is also *far* too easy and somewhat arrogant for academics to dismiss concerns from students, parents and others about the employability prospects of various types of graduates. For many (especially those who are the first in their family to go, as I was), going to university provides the means to enter a much wider range of potential employment than would

be the case otherwise.. For those who could always take more satisfying employment for granted, often those from families with multiple generations of graduates, and plenty of contacts, to bracket out such concerns is just contemptuous.

But one should not conflate vocationality with employability. An undergraduate degree in Law is rarely a full professional qualification to practice; for this a further professional course is required, often undertaken by those who took first degrees in other subjects. The law is a competitive field, and not all qualified lawyers will necessarily find work. The same is true for those who train in the creative and performing arts. In these latter, pay can be poor, and properly-paid work increasingly difficult to come by today with reduced audiences post-COVID, new restrictions on foreign travel and other factors. A [report on graduate outcomes on those in dance and drama](#) points out a progressive increase in the number of performance graduates (especially in dance) who pursue other types of unrelated employment. Another [report by the Musicians' Census](#), which surveyed around 6000 working musicians, found an average income of £30K, £4K below the UK national median income, with over half earning less than £14K. Nonetheless, there is various evidence that [employers value the wider transferable skills demonstrated by performing arts graduates](#), and it is as important to cultivate these as the more directly vocational ones.

The [most recent available table of graduate outcomes by subject](#) demonstrates a more nuanced picture than might be assumed from a simple elision of the distinction between vocationality and employability. If one combines figures for full-time employment, employment and further study, and full-time further study, to measure overall outcomes. medicine; veterinary sciences; architecture, building and planning; engineering and technology; law all score very high, but so do mathematics; physical sciences; and geography; and earth and environmental studies (social sciences). Business and management is roughly on a par with other social sciences; and biological and sport sciences. Lowest by far are design; creative and performing arts; and combined and general studies. Of course these figures need to be gauged across different sub-sectors as well, as the types of degrees offered can vary so much.

The Humboldtian model for research and teaching dates from a time when (in various parts of the developed world), university was an elite activity reserved for smaller numbers, many of whom would have had exemplary prior grounding in various disciplines before entering university. Without sweeping changes in secondary education, that will not be the case for many, indeed most, of today's students, and we need to embrace and accept a heterogeneous sector in which the high ideals *perhaps* still maintainable in the most elite institutions need to be modified.

Universities which are not *at all* engaged in research or critical thought should perhaps be categorised otherwise, as further education or technical colleges (as distinct from advanced institutes of technology). For the concept of a university to mean something, it must amount to more than a place for learning technical skills as if by rote. This is as true of the sciences (including the applied sciences) and the performing arts as it is of the humanities. On balance I believe the 1992 Education Act was a mistake in terms of appearing to iron out the fundamental differences between different types of institutions. It is surely no coincidence that the [Russell Group](#) was established just 2 years after the Act, and while its remit is somewhat different, it is often viewed as [akin to a UK Ivy League](#). After one set of hierarchies

were removed, this group was created to enable others to take their place, so the constituent institutions could preserve their own “differentials”. In some ways the new hierarchies may be more powerful than the old — “post-92” is just an informal designation used by academics, rather than anything which comes out directly in branding and marketing. This means that the lay prospective student, or parent, will see different universities’ differentiated in terms of national measures of quality, rather than institutions which are different in nature and the type of education they offer, thus missing differences of fundamental *type*. But the reality is that the post-92 sector (and the alternative education providers) frequently offer fundamentally different forms of education (as the CATs and the polytechnics used to), and there is little value in hiding this difference.

What sustains most universities and departments is simply attracting enough students — who are likely to build up around £60K in debt (for living costs as well as fees) during the course of their studies — and their teaching has to be at the centre. It is still important for academics to be involved in research (and I also agree with Wilson’s point that academics have to be allowed the possibility of attempting research which may fail), to stay on top of the latest developments in their discipline, and also keep wider transferable research skills alive, which themselves can fruitfully inform teaching. It is however an unaffordable luxury for many institutions to employ solely or primarily academics who only teach their narrow area of expertise, especially when some research does not translate into areas for which there is student demand. Many academics may see themselves as researchers first and foremost, then teachers, but I believe students, parents, government and much of the rest of society would have a different view. If various disciplines, especially in the arts and humanities, are to survive, those delivering them need to think more about provision of a solid grounding for those genuinely interested, which will serve them well and enable them to develop transferable skills, rather than one dealing primarily with the concerns and priorities of small communities of fellow academics. Attempts to maintain the status quo will just lead to more and more courses and departments failing.

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