

# The Covid-19 crisis and the future of tertiary education: a Green Paper

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This Green paper is a think-piece for staff and students at a mainstream university confronting the crisis of Tertiary Education with proposals presenting Green policy solutions. Re-written in continuing uncertainty over whether institutions will even be able to remain open, let alone what provision they will be able to make for student learning and residence, it presents the ideal of a new Tertiary Education that we believe is worth aspiring to and fighting for.

## Introduction

**T**ertiary Education (TE) is in crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic impacting upon the cumulative effect of 30 years of marketisation and privatisation that have increasingly restricted education to an instrument for allocation to the labour market. This paper aims to think through the nature of this crisis for TE in the context of three interlinked global crises: the climate/environmental crisis; the economic/financial crisis; and Covid-19.

The climate/environmental crisis is widely understood as an existential threat to the future of humanity. Despite this, most universities have not yet begun to rethink their business models but it is clear they will have to abandon extensive recruitment of international students, the creation of international partnerships and property acquisitions; ie. remaining or becoming resource-intensive, global corporations.

Mounting student fees have turned students into consumers. Outsourcing facilities management, catering and cleaning services provided by multinational companies using low-paid staff is further evidence of the failure of private sector and market-led solutions. Teaching too is increasingly

contracted out, though private F&H institutions have not expanded as successive governments intended, mainly due to questions of quality over which higher education retains a monopoly of recognition. This may be difficult to maintain with the growing pressure towards virtualised platform colleges and universities.

The Covid-19 crisis originating in the environmental crisis has widened fractures in society. Educational selection from the earliest ages divides young people in competing schools and colleges by academic exams demonstrating more or less expensively acquired cultural capital for entry to the hierarchy of snobbery, sexism and racism that universities often seem to present to applicants. Expected mass unemployment faces the sector with having to redefine its purpose during a major economic and social crisis.

## The end of educational expansion

Covid-19 has burst the bubble of market-led higher education expansion funded by fee/loans, with a period of severe retraction now anticipated. Government expects vice chancellors to put their houses in order by closing and merging courses and institutions, turning even larger parts of HE into FE with 'technical universities' limited to allegedly 'vocational' subjects on the one hand and research institutes removed from teaching but devoted to industry and commerce on the other. When rationalisation does not sufficiently meet government's expectations for closures and mergers of universities in a more differentiated hierarchy with variable fees by course and institution, further government 'restructuring regimes' will be imposed,

obviating market regulation by the now defunct Office for Students, with its National Student Survey being reviewed.

This future for HE is also presaged by the upcoming White Paper proposing to 'renationalise' the remaining 240 FE college corporations with their 2.2 million students. This number is down from more than 3 million students in 480 corporations in 1993, rising to 4 million by 2005. Nowadays however it is hard to tell what is and what isn't a college, as several college groups comprise more than one college, while many sixth form colleges have also merged or converted to academies. Adult students and part-timers are also reduced - although with full-time study as low as 16 hours a week, what is now called full-time would have been considered part-time in the 1970s. Yet, the biggest factor in this decline of FE must be that since the polytechnics were turned into universities in 1992 large parts of HE have turned into FE!

Any renaissance of the colleges will be presented as once again 'rebuilding the vocational route' to deliver T-level 'technical courses' in so-called 'development zones' meeting popular demand for apprenticeships, especially those few that are paid and offer higher level certificates plus guaranteed employment on completion. But most employers do not need apprentices and, if they do, prefer to train them themselves or to take already qualified graduates. This because, along with the decline in professional preparation at university, many skilled trades - like many knowledgeable professions - have been routinised, automated and outsourced in what is a predominantly service economy.

This 'multiskilling' undercuts both specialised trade training that historically took place on day-release to FE and also professional education in HE. Nevertheless, many young people continue running up a down-escalator of devalued academic qualifications as their only hope of secure semi-professions. Meanwhile, the universities that can persist in poaching applicants from those that can't. Crises and closures therefore threaten institutions at the bottom of the hierarchy, particularly those that were already financially overstretched as well as small and specialist providers.

Public understanding, or at least acceptance, of the role of Tertiary learning is therefore in question. Moreover, the notion of an academic vocation has also been lost even to some of its practitioners, save perhaps in the most prestigious antique institutions and their associated research centres. Marketisation has encouraged super-salaries at the

top of UK universities alongside the vast expansion in fractional, temporary, hourly-paid or even zero-hours contracts at the bottom. Under the domination of global financial capital presaged by Brexit, any further corporatisation of the sector will come at the cost of further debt to financial markets.

### Alternatively

Progression from compulsory education should be marked by an entitlement to free lifelong learning as part of the assumption of citizenship at 18. This entitlement need not be taken immediately or full-time, as other opportunities may be available both in and out of employment. Studying full- or part-time whilst living at home and in or out of employment will then be accepted as normal, as in mainland Europe, where most students apply to their local university though this does not exclude residence at specialised courses further afield.

Ideally, specialisation towards the development of a further and/or higher expertise would be undertaken on the basis of a more general Secondary schooling that might function less as the gigantic sorting machine that schools have become. After the exams fiasco of 2020, many teachers have suggested loosening or abandoning the test- and exam-based National Curriculum to restore teacher autonomy and remove the stigma of 'failure' from students. Tertiary Education could then aspire to return to the open model of provision represented by what can be called traditional FE, in which it was part of lecturers' occupational identities that colleges - unlike schools - 'never failed anyone' and - unlike universities - 'never turned anyone away' but found something for all applicants, with courses from special needs to post-graduate.

Until such entitlement to lifelong learning is introduced, tuition fees should be reduced to move from fees-based income to a central teaching grant. This is especially necessary with the temporary move to on-line teaching, which in general does not improve the quality of learning but which students are expected to continue paying full-cost fees for. The costs of subsidising and maintaining Tertiary institutions will be offset by those who choose to exercise their entitlement to lifelong learning later in life.

Combining their teaching with their own research, scholarship, experiment and creation is an ideal still upheld by many academics. Teaching should thus be integrated with practice as it is in apprenticeship as the model of an academic vocation with a

pedagogy of lifelong learning that is more research-, or rather, practice-led but by the student/trainee/apprentice. Although informed by MOOC-type courses depending on subject and level of learning, reading still remains the key undergraduate activity for scholarly courses, just as experiment, practice and creative endeavours are the core of lab- and studio-based studies in art, science and technology. These must be preserved, since they cannot be practised virtually, despite the problems of social distancing and hygiene which necessitate an increased commitment of equipment and technical, as well as pedagogic, support that will also be called for in libraries.

Moving towards sustainability entails a social transformation unparalleled in peacetime that will fundamentally alter the nature of Tertiary Education along with much else. This includes greater social inclusion and full participation in education and training programmes for all adults. The 'Preston model' of 'community wealth creation\*' has been advanced to bring 'anchor' institutions together to address pay, working conditions, models of business ownership, economic development strategies and education/training in the locality. Tertiary institutions would strengthen their relationship with local communities by using local businesses to provide services and employing local people as part of in-house contracts, thus allowing money to stay within the locality. TE should be flexible enough to meet the educational requirements of new and adaptive industries, local communities and others, including the local and national state.

Several Green Plans have been proposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and to the wider climate crisis. TE needs to offer new courses to facilitate these recommendations requiring workers qualified in new skills and with the knowledge to deliver carbon-neutral living. The creation of resilient infrastructure will also generate new types of employment, recognising the productive roles of key workers in a new professionalism based upon a more general and less academic schooling to develop democratic expertise across and also with academic/vocational specialisms.

The first task facing universities and colleges is therefore to build a campaign that promotes Tertiary Education as a public good understandable to all 'stakeholders' - students, parents and employers. Scientific experts and researchers have played key roles in combating Covid-19, making it easier to promote higher education as socially valuable. This should be facilitated by the entitlement to free

lifelong, full- or part-time, adult and community, further and higher Tertiary Education and training, in and/or out of employment.

### Some practical strategies

To stimulate TE contributions to a green and digital future, some questions for individual institutions are posed below.

#### 1. What are the training/education needs of future local/regional economies?

- 1.1 How are local industries and services, both public and private, affected by the aftermath of Covid-19 and by proposals for green transformation?
- 1.2 What are current local levels of employment/unemployment in terms of age, gender, BAME, disability?
- 1.3 What are the local and regional economic development strategies for addressing green, digital and ageing population needs, and how can they be adapted to and addressed by TE?

#### 2. How to build new coalitions and partnerships

- 2.1 What are the existing patterns of provision for Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) in the locality/sub-region?
- 2.2 What is the nature of partnership working between PCET institutions, local authorities, private and not-for-profit sectors and community groups?
- 2.3 What are the opportunities to establish partnerships between tertiary institutions, local authorities and local businesses?

#### 3. Where are the needs and possibilities for education and training?

**3.1** Covid-19 has made apparent the urgency of planning and coordinating **health and social care services** as a public service with a professionally qualified and adequately remunerated workforce\*\*.

**3.2 Primary and Secondary Education**, a backlog of pupil development requires remediation while reforms to the content as well as the form of exam-based curricula can be stimulated by humanities and social sciences.

**3.3** Making the existing **housing** stock more energy efficient needs training, with the development of new expertise by architecture, planning and surveying departments.

**3.4** Covid-19 has highlighted the size of the low-paid workforce which provides **public services**. This provides opportunities for new courses allowing key workers to develop their skills and improve their terms and conditions of employment, helping them to move into new jobs where there are skills shortages as part of their career progression.

**3.5** Some **manufacturing** companies have changed production to meet demands for PPE under Covid. Sustained by business and engineering faculties they could be re-orientated to make other essential products.

**3.6** Many **digital technology** strategies have training implications to which educational institutions already teaching and researching in this area can contribute.

**3.7** Developing local **food supply chains** will be strained post-Brexit and will need support from locally based micro-enterprises, also requiring technical expertise.

**3.8** There will also be opportunities for local **entrepreneurship** such as many business

schools already provide but strengthened by a focus on green, digital and inclusive strategies.

These opportunities, including those for **culture and recreation**, will vary according to locality but all can build on existing provision within TE, affording access to further and higher education and training as part of popular entitlement to free lifelong learning.

\*How we built community wealth in Preston (2019) Centre for Local Economic Strategies/Preston City Council

\*\*Creating the workforce of the future Commission A new collaborative approach for the NHS and colleges in England (2020) NHS Reset/Colleges of the Future/NHS Confederation.

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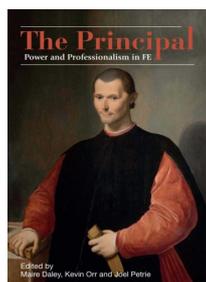
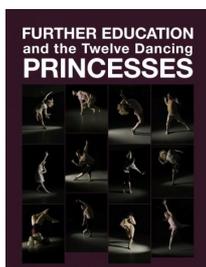
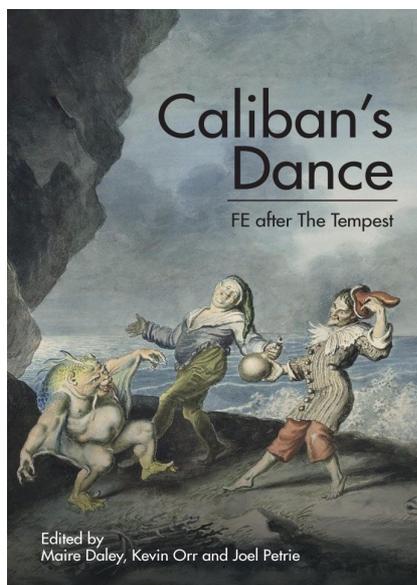
## Caliban's Dance: FE after The Tempest

Ed. Maire Daley, Kevin Orr & Joel Petrie

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*Caliban's Dance* - the final volume of the *Dancing Princesses Trilogy*. In *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, contributors asked 'Where in FE is there space to dance?'. In volume two, *The Principal: Power and Professionalism in FE*, they probed 'What restricts the dance?' Now they ask: 'With no restrictions, what would a future FE dance be like?' *Caliban's Dance* counters the sector's reductive utilitarianism with vivid dreams of a sector unfettered. Its central metaphor Caliban is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play that can be read as a manifesto for second chances, transformation and learning. In re-imagining FE as utopia, the contributors demand that it be so on their own powerful, democratic terms.



### Praise for Caliban's Dance

'... a triumph ... (shows) the collective, democratic power to transform the sector for the good ...' **Frank Coffield, Emeritus Professor, UCL Institute of Education**

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