

# Predicting a future that's already here?

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David Palfreyman and Paul Temple *Universities and Colleges, a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press 2017, 150pp. ISBN 9 780198 766 131

This book's title points in the right direction, though unlikely to aid the assiduous tourist making Ryle's category error of confusing Oxbridge colleges as parts with the university as a whole. (Among the many bits of information that are so compactly presented throughout, it is revealed that some colleges are wealthier than their universities - the richest, Trinity College Cambridge, having an endowment of 'some £1 billion').

However, Palfreyman retreats from his previous characterisation of Tertiary Education as a level of education represented in the UK by the formula  $FE+HE=TE$  and following on from the clearly comprehended Primary and Secondary levels. Instead, as an authority on HE law, he and his co-author, Paul Temple from the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education (IoE) / University College London (UCL), deftly order a series of perspectives on universities into just seven chapters, beginning with their history, describing their 'core task' of teaching and how they work (are they happy places to work in? Yes and No/ Sometimes) in relation to research disciplines and departments ordered in different patterns globally to provide a range of increasingly micro-managed 'student experiences', or 'journeys' in the jargon, and ending their concise summary by considering where 'the university' is going.

Colleges, other than at Oxbridge, thus get rather lost, even the US community ones in California's exemplary 1960s Master Plan that related them to 'the Multiversity of California' as much as to employment. The book is nevertheless a vital

reference to the workings of contemporary English HE which is its main focus. Especially as David is on the Board of the Office for Students (OFS), described unusually directly on the book's dust-jacket as 'the regulator of English universities'. Under its Chair, Sir Michael Barber, HE can expect to follow Pascal's theory of prayer espoused by the Great Deliverologist: get down on your knees, go through the motions and true belief will follow to deliver *kwality* teaching; not research, which is presented by Palfreyman and Temple as best left to look after itself.

## Critical

As well as the relations of teaching to research, the authors carefully delineate various other critical issues in contemporary HE - will 'unbundled' 'platform universities' dissolve themselves in MOOCs (Massive Open-Access On-line Courses), for instance? Or will management extinguish residual collegiality (save again in the above antique colleges!)? Their concluding assessment of the future for England's universities however is towards steady expansion, changing their form but not their essence through a more diffuse system with concentrations of quality and excellence linked almost coincidentally and as an unfortunate by-product to the reproduction of power and privilege in society. This future will be cemented if students can be induced to invest in their own human capital through course fees regulated by the OFS according to subject and institution.

Against this, John McDonnell has recently removed any doubt as to Labour's commitment to scrap student fees. Consequently, the Tories are trimming but still want to sell the loan book.

Meanwhile, Alison Wolf has been reported in *PSE* proposing cut-price, two-year technical degrees delivered in FE, even though these will predictably not be acceptable to most school-leavers and their parents who know that only a 'proper' (academic) degree qualifies them for even semi-secure, para-professional employment. Also, that most apprenticeships are worthless in a service economy that does not need them. Hopes of building Higher Apprenticeships into an alternative route have foundered for the same reason.

Former HE Minister, Bill Rammell, now Vice Chancellor of Bedfordshire University, goes further in proposing comprehensive higher education where all 18+ year-olds work to an equivalent level if not at an identical curriculum. Again, this will not be popular with the many current students who would already rather be somewhere else than at uni', especially if they have to pay for their compulsory participation. Or were confined there by the learningfare of a Universal Basic Income. No more does the cross-party consensus on (yet again) 'rebuilding the vocational route' with technical as against academic qualifications from 11-, 14- or 16-plus, along the lines of the 2016 Sainsbury Report, recognise that training and education do not of themselves produce jobs.

### Entitlement

To these possibilities, Palfreyman's previous formulation with his long-term collaborator, Ted Tapper, of *Universities and Colleges* as tertiary education afforded another way forward, especially when tertiary level learning is conceived widely as lifelong adult continuing education and training including a statutory Youth Service. Thus, adult educationist Tom Schuller has recently proposed an entitlement of £5,000 p.a. that could be taken up at any time from school-leaving into retirement and in relation to occupation, interest or recreation. An 'ecology' (as Ken Spours and Ann Hodgson called it in 2012) of such tertiary education would integrate schools, colleges and universities with training in and out of employment from local through regional up to national level with access to various specialisms of expertise in research institutes. It has even been suggested that this could take a National Education Service out of political control, like proposals for an independent NHS - though the danger might be in subjecting it instead to the control of Vice Chancellors.

Certainly a National Education Service worthy of the name must be much more than a National Schools Service, important though it is to bring academies, free and (possibly) private schools under

local democratic control. Yet most children are unaware and do not care who runs their schools (unless there were means for them to begin to do so themselves). Their teachers, whose unions seek to maintain their members in front of classrooms delivering the academic National Curriculum, alienate those pupils who remain (physically if not mentally) into a dulled conformity, though many (boys especially) leave from 14-on, or earlier.

For the *aporia* in David and Paul's prediction of more of the same only more so lies in the changing labour market for which education and training supposedly qualifies its graduates and apprentices. They write that 'Graduates from lower socio-economic groups who not only manage to get into higher education but also succeed in graduating (especially from an elite, high-brand university or college) may well see a welcome life-long payoff by way of career earnings for their personal investment.' But, as well as repaying their fees and maintenance, they may also pay a price as 'class migrants' moving from a working- to a middle-class background. Indeed, this is how Palfreyman presents himself in this book, moving from Northern grammar school to bursar of New College, Oxford.

It is a familiar trope of government policy and pedagogic effort that the exceptional cases of limited upward social mobility prove the rule - if they can do it, so can you. This ignores the fact that limited absolute 'social mobility' is no longer upward, as it was for a selected few after the war, but is today general and downward. The mass of students are thus left desperately running up a down-escalator of devaluing qualifications as the traditional professional and managerial middle class is hollowed out by outsourcing, automation and AI. In its place a new middle-working 'working-middle of society finds itself intermediate between the top 0.1 per cent (plus their dwindling numbers of hangers-on) above and the growing precariously working Reserve Army of Labour beneath. This already comprises perhaps 40 per cent of poorly paid, insecure, unskilled employment.

The regulation of teaching in tertiary education that will be imposed by the OFS can therefore at best only preserve the illusion that nothing has changed as the university continues 'reinventing itself while also broadly retaining its core shape'. This is 'The future for universities and colleges' that Palfreyman and Temple predict in their last chapter and it is already here.