**‘WE CAN’T GO ON LIKE THIS’: BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION AS IT IS AND AS IT COULD BE**

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**‘the leading object of government is, to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders – to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all – to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life’**

**Abraham Lincoln**

**Introduction**

Well, of course, we can go on like this. But I want to argue that we shouldn’t if we want to have a leading higher education sector in twenty years time. But to get to that land of milk and honey, or at least to a situation in which British higher education still bestrides the world, will require genuine strategic aplomb - and real political will. I hope that we can summon both.

Of course, there is never a right time to start a debate of this kind. But the time has become peculiarly appropriate, I think, if for the most unfortunate of reasons. On or around the turn of the year, it became clear that we were transiting to a different world from the one we have faced for the last couple of decades, one so different that it was going to become necessary to pick up and dust off solutions that have been discussed before but have often been dismissed as too radical.

I should declare my own hand. I am utterly passionate about Universities. The best of them act as global lighthouses, beaming out values and knowledge to the world in these uncertain times. Of course, they also power the economy, and give undergraduates and postgraduates the skills they need to do a good job, as well as promoting the open social mobility that is crucial to modern societies. Again, they are integrally involved in offering solutions to the world’s great problems. But, and here is the religious bit, it is their core values which ultimately make Universities worth having and keeping, values like advancing cosmopolitanism, keeping the fires of conscience burning, protecting and tending cultural memories, cleaving to seriousness, and generating wonder (Thrift, 2009). The best Universities not only disseminate but continually re-create these values. And British universities are surely among the best.

Let’s start with some well-rehearsed facts that amply document that assertion. With one per cent of the world’s population, the UK receives twelve per cent of the world’s citations. There are 11 British universities in the Shanghai Jiatong World Ranking top 100 and 17 in the Times Higher Education World Ranking top 100. British universities played host to some 350,000 international students in 2006/07. The UK share of international trade in higher education is holding at 11 per cent, the second highest country share behind the United States. International education proves to be a valuable export, too, estimated to be in the region of £12.5 billion. In other words, British higher education is at a high point of both reputation and influence.

**The Issues**

Well, if British Universities are doing so well, why am I worrying? I want to make an argument about British higher education as it reaches what I suspect is a zenith which many will likely dismiss as doomsaying. I want to argue that if we are not very careful it is downhill from here. Most particularly, I want to argue that we now need to start introducing at least an element of genuine design into our University system or we will be left to carve rump. And the reason?

That is very simple: the level of competition is going to intensify and intensify markedly for the attentions of the estimated 150 million students worldwide in 2010, and more thereafter, and this competition will be firmly centred on quality. Chinese Universities will continue to improve. City states like Singapore and Abu Dhabi will produce large and scholarly Universities. European Universities will finally start to fulfil their potential: think of the reorganization currently going on in Germany or the drastic amalgamations taking place in Denmark. Canadian and Australian universities will become bigger and more imposing. But, and here I immediately make a link with the Fulbright, it is the United States that will remain our pre-eminent competitor. Indeed US Universities will, I suspect, go from strength to strength on the international stage, Not only are the top US Universities much richer than their British counterparts but they have accumulated endowment, increased income and expanded turnover at an enormous pace. Take just one figure as an illustration: the percentage annual growth in university endowments up until 2007 averaged 15% to 20% for the top 30 US institutions. In turn, even given their relative inefficiency, US Universities converted that accumulation of assets and activity into real growth, adding staff and facilities at speed.

Of course, US Universities have been very hard hit by the turmoil in world financial markets. Endowments have been particularly badly affected: one study of 235 US universities found that the value of their endowments dropped by 24 per cent on average in the last six months of 2008. Many state Universities are struggling with reduced state budgets and are having to raise tuition fees. Private Universities without sufficient kudos to be able to continue to charge premiums on their undergraduate fees are struggling too. But, I am confident that the top US Universities will recover, aided by the gradual rebound of what are still large endowments, an administration which understands that they are a key element of a ‘soft’ foreign policy, and a 60 billion dollar federal recovery package, which includes 25 billion dollars for research[[1]](#footnote-2). As this recovery beckons, they will again be able to influence what happens to British higher education – by dictating research agendas, by buying up the best academics – this has already been happening with highly-cited scholars for some time (Oswald, 2007) - by tempting away British students, and, most seriously of all, by attracting more and more foreign students, often by offering quite generous stipends. British Universities may well be hard pressed to respond to them.

How are British Universities going to meet such a threat? Not well, would seem to be the answer. Why such a gloomy prognosis? I want to point to four main threats.

First of all, and most obviously, the financial outlook is worsening by the moment. The sector has probably reached a peak in income. It is quite clear that there will be substantial government cutbacks in 2010/2011, no matter which political party is in power, and now there is a further threat from ’contestability’. Cutbacks will probably last for several years, only partially leavened by the possible prospect of increased top-up fees which, in the worst-case scenario, may well act simply as a substitute for missing government money. There are other severe pressures on running a University coming up too, most notably the rising commitments associated with pension liabilities and the demographic downturn. The result, at least, is clear. British Universities will have to retrench, sometimes quite severely, if they are to survive, right at the point where they have become world-leading[[2]](#footnote-3).

Second, there is a general lack of strategy. Of course, we will all hope for good things from the Denham Review on the future of higher education. But this will not by itself be able to compensate for the fact that there is no formal strategic body overseeing British higher education with the levers to easily effect change. Many have seen this as a strength: I see it, at least at this time, as a weakness. In England, HEFCE has done a good job in the circumstances in which it has found itself over the last few years but it is constrained by its own mission. After all, it is primarily a funding allocation machine, not a strategic body. It ’distributes public money to universities and colleges in England that provide higher education’. HEFCE’s six strategic aims and objectives are broad headings[[3]](#footnote-4), not a strategy as such, and the Funding Council is sometimes in danger of carrying out strategy by funding competition. Too often, therefore, it can seem as though HEFCE acts like a subscriber organization, careful of transgressing university autonomy, while simultaneously undermining University autonomy by producing such a tightly prescribed funding environment that it is difficult to take any meaningfully different initiative. I should stress that this is no criticism of many of HEFCE’s impulses - its Strategic Development Fund has clearly been used to finance some interesting and worthwhile advances. Still I suspect that its financial allocations have too often produced a regression to a mean.

Third, there will be more encroachment by private providers working for profit. Companies like BPP are likely to forge ahead. Certainly, the touch of the private sector will become an increasing reality, at least for low overhead vocational teaching. If student fees rise, it will only make this kind of teaching increasingly viable. Indeed, it is not impossible to see a scenario in which private companies pick up discommoded Universities and turn them into vocational teaching machines, unencumbered by the overheads of scholarship.

Fourth, what response there is to the heightened level of competition is likely to be utilitarian - to regroup around subjects and disciplines which can bring in the money - but that is as likely to exacerbate the problem as it is to solve it. In particular, the most important property of British higher education will be threatened – its high quality. British higher education is attractive to the world because it speaks to quality and quality can be seen not only as a virtue in itself but as an economic driver. British higher education could run the danger of losing its main academic edge to the top echelon of US providers which, partly because they are often better funded, still espouse innately held academic values, for example that a University should provide a full range of disciplines – including the obscure and often downright unpopular - in order to produce a fulfilling educational environment.

The risk must be that, if we are not careful, in twenty years time, we will be left with just a few bright stars which are still able to hold on to the quality required to survive in a more competitive global higher education sector. The RAE/REF and other audit procedures, effective as they may have been in the past in driving quality upwards, are now simply a quaint diversion from the task of re-positioning British higher education so that it is still a dominant force in and for the future.

At this point some members of the audience will be saying, so what? We will still be punching above our weight in research. We will still be educating large numbers of students. We will still be doing pretty well. Why bother? We will still be competitive, just not as competitive as before. We can make do and mend.

It’s a typical British reaction. But it won’t do. Not only do we have a world-leading sector – and, truth to tell, we don’t have many of those - but it is a sector which has all kinds of spillovers. It helps to fuel the economy, of course. But it also produces active and informed citizens. It feeds the intellectual life of the nation. It acts as a means of producing influence in the world out of all proportion to the numbers employed in it through the sheer number of overseas students who get to experience the UK – usually positively. And so on.

Equally, there is the danger that the ability of academics in British universities to do good work will be threatened. Doing good academic work requires many things, of course – equipment and technical help in the case of the sciences, libraries for the humanities, access to electronic resources, and so on. But what it most requires is time. My other concern is that we will end up with a situation in which too few people will have the time to do good work. Weighed down by more teaching and more administration, they will gradually succumb to the additional pressures placed upon them.

**Some Possible Solutions**

It seems clear to me that to be able to meet the threats we can now see on the horizon we need to at least start talking about a different kind of higher education sector. But we need to make sure that it is the one we want, one that won’t drive down quality and one that won’t become steadily less attractive to the world as a result. I want to argue that we could actually set out to design such a higher education sector, a sector which is more heterogeneous and yet still does the business. But subject to one caveat: I believe that the higher education system is a public good. As John Adams put it ‘The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it’. But that does not mean that British universities necessarily have to cosy up to the public sector from which they have so long been at least partially autonomous. There are other ways of discharging their public duty.

Clearly, I cannot offer solutions to all of the problems besetting British universities in the space of half-an-hour. There is the problem of maintaining high educational standards, a problem we cannot just sweep under the carpet. There is the problem of whether we can credibly argue that the three year specialized undergraduate degree can still act as a gold standard in British higher education and whether our students sometimes know too much about too little as a result of its ascendancy. There is the problem of ensuring that our degrees demonstrate value for money but do not just become a moment in some Gradgrind economic calculus. There is the problem of meeting student expectations in the wake of top-up fees. And so on.

In any case, there is a credible case for arguing that the sector no longer coheres as a structured hierarchy in which a global solution to problems like these can be found. Rather it exists as a horizontal network of institutions often doing quite different things. British higher education has become an archipelago, rather than a single continent, and different policies are needed for different parts of it.

So in this talk I have decided to concentrate, at least to begin with, on just one subset of British universities – universities which can credibly lay claim to being research-intensive Universities[[4]](#footnote-5) but which exist just below Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial and UCL, the four British Universities which are probably large enough, rich enough and powerful enough that it is possible for them to relatively unproblematically retain their stature in times to come. In other words, I want to talk about the 30 or so research-intensive institutions which still depend on the national brand but for whom, equally, the national brand is bolstered by their reputation. They are the UK equivalent of the best US State universities, I suppose. It is this ‘fertile crescent’ of universities without the natural advantages of the big four which has been one of the true success stories of the British higher education sector in the years since the 1960s. Not only has it contributed to the success of the big four, by providing necessary and stiff competition, but it has also released enormous academic energies. A successful British higher education system needs to enable more of these institutions to move into the higher stratum of truly global research universities like the top four. But I suspect that it is precisely these institutions which are going to be hit most severely by a wave of competition for which they can only, truth to tell, be partially prepared.

Of course, there is no simple answer to the forces that threaten these institutions. What is needed is a series of separate but related policy courses of action which will add up to a gradual re-design of this part of the British higher education system which will equip it for further success. Design implies not leaving it to the market. It implies conscious decision. It implies some loss of autonomy for the cause of the greater good. It implies planning, though of a very particular sort.

I should start by declaring my own preferences. I believe that the UK needs a more diverse higher education system along the lines of the California system. It needs this diversity because at the moment it is much more homogeneous than is often thought and, as a result, it is vulnerable. The California system is heterogeneous, bringing together all kinds of institutions into a functioning and resilient whole. It is by no means perfect but it has a self-organising structure which still eludes British higher education.

But what seems clear is that we really do need to start thinking the unthinkable. There has been some generally desultory talk about reforming the higher education sector but, a few genuine moves aside, very little momentum in any particular direction. The system we have inherited dates from the Robbins expansion of the 1960s and the addition of a post-92 sector which combined with government ambitions to produce a greater proportion of the population as university-educated in order to propel a second great wave of expansion after 1997. Now, I believe, we need to think again. Not about continuing to expand the university-educated population – all the evidence suggests that the impact of higher education on economic growth is positive (see, most recently, Goldin and Katz, 2008) and this is before we get to issues of quality of life – but rather about how we deliver that education. So what are the possible courses of action?

In order to achieve the goal of a higher education sector which continues to have a large number of world-leading universities, it is clear that we need to consider a number of possible ways of proceeding which I set out below. In none of these options do I want to suggest that I have found a panacea, or even necessarily an original solution – some of them have been considered before and rejected but may now simply have found their time. Rather, I believe that we need a time of limited experiment with a number of options, including those I will set out, simply to see what might work – and what won’t. No one knows what the right answer or answers is: we will have to feel our way towards solutions.

First, and most obviously, more thought needs to be given to the size characteristics of British higher education. I think that there is a pressing need for more consolidation of institutions in the top 30. This is not for purposes of creating size for its own sake, so much as it is for the purposes of producing concentrated research power and thereby creating institutions with enough mass to protect the values and work conditions that we hold dear, even in straitened times. Of course, it would be wise not to be starry-eyed about such a course of action. But I suspect that the alternative could be the slow relative decline of many of these institutions as they find themselves unable to produce enough papers in top class journals, enough clusters of top-class academics, or sufficient world-class scientific facilities to keep up with the world-leaders. So far in the UK, though there have been at least 27 mergers in the British higher education system since 1997, the record of merger and consolidation amongst the top 30 or so has been mixed, to put it but mildly, usually foundering on the shores of institutional autonomy. Thus, the merger between the Victoria University of Manchester and UMIST is the UK’s only real example of a strong institutional merger within the top 30 and it was established with the clear strategic aim of taking the newly merged institution into the top 20 of world universities. Other similar institutions have considered the case for merger – most notably the University of Birmingham and Aston University and University College London and Imperial College – but so far no other major consolidations have occurred.

But consolidation does not have to consist of formal merger – always a difficult and fraught and costly procedure, given the contrasting cultures of many British universities. There are other ways of proceeding, The commercial world provides some interesting models. For example, there are so-called holding company mergers such as those between Air France and KLM or Peugeot and Citroen or even conglomerates like Unilever in which each partner keeps a considerable degree of independence from the other. Surely this is a route worth thinking about, not least because it could lead to more sharing. We could even foresee a time in which a number of the top 30 were gathered in formal clusters or alliances, rather like a stronger version of the current White Rose Alliance.

The brief mention of mergers between firms from different jurisdictions leads me to consider a second possible course of action: foreign merger or even takeover. It is interesting that higher education institutions often seem to be thought to be out of bounds to these means of proceeding but there seems to be no reason why they should not at least be considered: after all a number of foreign higher education institutions already run operations in the UK. Foreign merger or takeover might be one way of solving the chronic underfunding of many of the 30 or so British Universities I am discussing, especially so far as capital is concerned. It might also produce interesting scientific synergies if, for example, a US and UK University were conjoined. And, on first examination at least, it is not illogical. After all, in the business sector, firms that get to a certain size and cannot grow farther without a major tranche of investment will often opt for merger or takeover as a means of accessing more capital.

A third course of action might be to consider private ownership not-for-profit status for a few of the top 30. Private ownership (not, I hasten to add, privatization) is no panacea - there is not a single major US private University which does not retain a heavy reliance on government funds through research grants and the like. Any move would therefore need to be experimental, concentrating on just two or three institutions which have both the wherewithal and the drive. But it could have three positive outcomes. First, it would increase the overall heterogeneity of the system. Second, it could, after the initial expense, take a load off the higher education funding model in what will be difficult times. Third, it would provide an alternative to the publicly funded system which would, at least, be interesting. Conventionally, in discussing private ownership, it is argued that the money to provide the means of securing an endowment which would be sufficient to allow an institution to become private could be realized from periodically selling off the student loan book. But, assuming that this resource could be realized (and there are considerable problems), it is a finite amount and it seems only sensible to maximize any initiative by concentrating on the institutions which would produce the greatest return for the smallest outlay, rather than oft-mooted candidates like Oxford and Cambridge which would require a considerable outlay and, in any case, should probably remain funded by the public system on grounds of principle. Taking a calculation comparing percentage reliance on public funds (excising income from government agencies like research councils) and the absolute amount of funding that would actually be needed, shows that only a few Universities are realistic candidates for private ownership, in that they would have the reputation and wherewithal to survive outside the state sector’s embrace. But it is certainly a course of action worth considering.

A fourth course of action is specialization. In my opinion, many of the 30 or so Universities I have been talking about have too large a base of disciplines to be able to compete on the world stage effectively in research, given their size. The average British civic, for example, will often have more than 40 academic departments and faces a constant struggle to resource them in a constant roundelay of on-off financing. Whereas the top four can probably afford to continue with this level of generality, it is unlikely that all the research-intensive universities can retain their current disciplinary span if they wish to be world class players in research. This suggests to me that while some institutions might consolidate in some way so as to produce the ground to allow disciplinary diversity to continue, others might follow greater levels of specialization, so that they can compete more effectively but using collaboration to assure that diversity can continue more generally. This is not to suggest that each and every institution should follow the route of perhaps the most successful and internationalised specialist British higher education institutions – Imperial and LSE - only that more could.

None of this is to argue that a great round of departmental closures is now necessary. Rather, thought needs to be given simultaneously to what disciplines each institution should be involved with, and which areas of a discipline, all set within what will be an increasingly interdisciplinary framework. Universities already do this singly but if they did it jointly, there could be genuine dividends. There are obvious precedents. At times in the past, universities have collaborated to move departments or selected personnel from one institution to another. Again, there is no reason why there should not be more intra-disciplinary institutional collaborations like those pioneered in Scotland and now spread, with HEFCE sponsorship, to England with the aim of producing a relatively specific division of labour[[5]](#footnote-6).

Of course, none of these four courses of action are mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are often complementary. But they could have the aggregate effect of moving the system from its current equilibrium to something much less tidy but more resilient. Whatever the case, they surely need examining in more detail.

What seems clear is that, whatever happens, we need to move into an era of much greater collaboration. This will be difficult. The success of the top 30 or so universities I have been talking about has been founded on competition. Collaboration between them can therefore be accompanied by suspicion about whether other partners are getting more from the deal and sometimes even by a slight tinge of paranoia. That will now have to stop. This is where HEFCE can definitely have a role (if that role is not now undermined by government talk of ‘contestability’ that could have the result of setting these universities against each other just when they need to be moving in the opposite direction). HEFCE has been wisely promoting more collaboration. Surely that effort now needs to step up a gear. And there is hope of success. In recent times when funding has pointed towards greater collaboration these universities have responded[[6]](#footnote-7).

Let me now come to the case of British higher education as a whole. In doing so, I want to recall my previous remarks made about British higher education being a horizontal network rather than a structured hierarchy. Within this network, many innovations have taken place and it is clearly imperative to keep a sufficient degree of flexibility in the system to allow that innovation to continue. But that is not to say that some more stitching together cannot take place. It should be possible to re-engineer the relationships between British higher education institutions so as to build on and strengthen the de facto division of labour that already exists now. In order to make my point, I want to turn to the example of the United States, as befits a Fulbright lecture. We should not be starry-eyed, of course. The United States hardly qualifies as an optimal higher education system. The system debars many of its poorest high school students from going on to University by reason of the high tuition fees charged, and concentrates its least well-off students in institutions with the least resources. The financial aid system for students is suboptimal, to be polite. But the United States System has something we have only half-achieved: a mixed system of private, public, large and small, residential and commuter, religious and secular, nonprofit and for profit institutions which, at its best, provides the kind of diversity and resilience that can suit any situation.

Returning to the Californian model, one of its great successes has been its ability to link higher education institutions into a continuous chain of excellence, one which allows the brightest students to make their way through a defined hierarchy based on a definite division of labour. Two years at community college can be followed by two years in an elite University. Mobility is built into the system. At the same time, community colleges concentrate on teaching and knowledge transfer, rather than research. The California system constitutes a genuine higher education ecology. In it, there is room for large elite Universities like Berkeley and UCLA, a whole series of very good Universities like San Diego, Santa Barbara, Irvine and Davis, the big national research laboratories like the Livermore or the Scripps, specialist schools like UCSF, and a host of community colleges which act as feeds. Added to this, outside the U Cal system are a host of private Universities, including two private Universities of extraordinary influence, Stanford and CalTech, with more to come, I suspect. This heterogeneous ecology has all kinds of advantages and, most particularly, institutions can unashamedly specialize in what they are good at. Research is concentrated in institutions that do it well. Excellent students from whatever background can find the right level of institution to work in. So far as innovation is concerned, firms are passed to the right kind of higher education partner with the appropriate skills to help them. And so on. The system isn’t perfect, of course, and it has come under considerable strain lately, but it should certainly give us pause.

There are, of course, formidable barriers to developing a resilient system like this here – the absence of four year degrees and over-regulated markets come to mind[[7]](#footnote-8) – but perhaps it is time to think outside what often seems like a hermetically sealed system in which funding and other mechanisms are all conspiring to make us think on a much smaller scale than we should or, indeed, need to. Perhaps we can build a different but equally successful heterogeneous system.

**Conclusions**

I am well aware that in the middle of a recession and with public spending cuts looming may not seem the best time to be espousing at least a degree of radical change. But I think now is exactly the right moment to be thinking seriously about what is at stake – and how to change the stakes (cf Taylor, 2009, Macilwain, 2009). As befits a Fulbright lecture, I have emphasized some of the positive lessons that the United States can teach us about higher education, leaving some of the negative ones aside. But I have left the last positive lesson to my conclusion. I think that Americans have a deep-seated respect for higher education. They sure as heck complain about the rising cost – and who can blame them? They rightly complain about some of the more, how can I put it, unusual admissions policies of some of its major institutions. Some of them are suspicious about what they perceive as a liberal conspiracy pervading the groves of American academe. All Americans are rightly worried about the relative decline in the college-educated population. And so on. But, when all is said and done, Americans do actually seem to like universities. I am not sure that that kind of liking has ever been engrained in British culture. Universities are still often viewed with suspicion, even, every now and then, hostility. It is still sometimes difficult to persuade the public that they have a remarkably successful sector of the economy on their hands or that universities have much to offer except a necessary means of gaining a better job. General pride in their achievements? I’m not sure.

Such may be the common plaint of the Vice-Chancellor or Principal or President, but it seems to me that we have never been able to build the kind of solidarity with the British mentalité that exists in the US or that is associated with other British institutions like the NHS (which, of course, has enormous and growing University involvement). The result is that we do not have consent, just grudging acceptance. In the end, in order to allow British universities to keep doing well, we need to work on this lack of consent. Part of it may be a result of the longstanding British suspicion of intellectuals, although, as Collini (2006) has pointed out, this is too complex an affair to be regarded as simply anti-intellectualism. Part of it may be that Universities simply do not do enough to demonstrate their powers and capacities, although I am sometimes slightly at a loss to know what else can be done. And part of it may simply be a relic form, likely to die out as more and more Britons are educated at University. But what seems certain is that we need to do much, much more to get through to people. I have thrown down challenges to government this evening but the real challenge is for British universities to come to seem not just a necessary evil but an indispensable cardinal of British life and, in the end, only universities can meet that challenge. Perhaps we all need to buy up a college football team!

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1. Indeed, the latter figure may be closer to $39 billion dollars in all. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. New sources of income do not seem to be appearing magically on the horizon. Development income will rise and will be a help but it will do so slowly. It is unlikely that British industry will magically ride to the rescue with significant new sources of demand for teaching and accreditation: industry will be of help at the margins but that’s going to be it for all but a very few institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ### The six aims and objectives are: enhancing excellence in learning and teaching; widening participation and fair access; enhancing excellence in research; enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society; sustaining a high quality higher education sector, and; enabling excellence.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. I am well aware that issues of teaching will loom large in these universities as well (Macilwain, 2009 but these are clearly the universities on which a large part of the UK’s research reputation now hangs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. I am well aware that a division of labour can only be relatively specific, given the fact that disciplines constantly evolve and that interdisciplinary research is becoming more common. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Think, for example, of several discipline and industrial outreach alliances or the recent round of AHSC bids. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ironically, in the United States there is a debate as to whether to switch to three year degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)