

## **Precarity and the Demise of the Autonomous Academic**

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Review of *Universities in a Neoliberal World*, by Alex Callinicos

In the last quarter century, universities in the UK have been transformed beyond recognition. The Robbins expansion of the 1960s was about shifting these institutions from elite intellectual finishing schools for the future patrician administrators of the social order into sites for the preparation and training of 'high level manpower', as the literature of the day called it. The recent expansions under Conservative and New Labour administrations since the 1980s were about creating a mass HE system. If Robbins almost doubled the participation rate of each generation from 7% to 12%, the recent expansions have doubled it again. Today 30%, or two and a quarter million, of 18 and 19 year-olds go to university.

The consequences of this have been dramatic. With no expansion of resources to match the growth in student numbers, the nature of the experience of higher education for students has deteriorated sharply, and the conditions of academic staff have declined in proportion. Indeed, the nature of being a student and being an academic have changed. These social roles are no longer the same.

While today's students necessarily have little awareness of the experiences of earlier generations, those employed in the sector can have personal and collective memories of what has transpired. Expansion on the cheap has led to overflowing lectures, educationally impossible seminar groups of 15, 20 or even 30 students, and the virtual disappearance of tutorials.

It has led to the Americanisation of delivery in seminars and modules almost everywhere. If the former is structurally idiotic, given the nature of the Christian calendar (with seminars broken-backed because of Christmas and Easter), its reduction of effective teaching weeks from 30, or so, to 24 (excluding assessment periods) constitutes the mis-selling scandal of the sector. Meanwhile, modularisation chops delivery up into 'bite-sized' chunks that can be offered to students on a 'pick-and-mix' basis that renders intellectual coherence in the student experience, and the development in students of progressively more sophisticated knowledge and analytical and synthesising skills, almost impossible.

For their part, students find themselves mired in debt from the start, and increasingly driven to adopt an instrumental approach to the intellectual choices that they make. Courses are measured by their potential future returns rather than their inherent challenges or their address of students' interests. Most students are forced by the lack of grants to work long hours. It could be said that with the absence of adequate tutorial opportunities, at least the unintended consequence of poverty and a part-time job is that students get to talk to tutors while serving them at a bar, or giving them change at a Tesco cash desk.

The consequences for staff have been equally stark:

- comparative pay has declined sharply, and the recent dispute achieved little to reverse that trend;
- staff are driven by the costly and irrational RAE process to compete individually to secure a high research standing, and to de-prioritise teaching and administration, consigning much of the former to insecure and underpaid doctoral students;
- inter-individual, inter-departmental and inter-institutional competition then threaten to undermine the collegiality on which much of the value of academic inquiry and its dissemination of results depends;
- they work in institutions which increasingly can make little claim to the autonomy from government or corporate interference on which they once prided themselves;
- academic staff have lost control of the educational and research process to a layer of institutional managers aping the mind-numbing platitudes of thrusting corporate vigour, and who take salaries commensurate with those of the executives in the private sector on whose styles and pomposities they increasingly model themselves;
- increasingly academic staff can no longer preserve the illusion of their special position as scholars and dispassionate investigators as their situation is worsened financially, professionally and socially – they have become, and increasingly see themselves as having become, merely another section of the workforce – they are undergoing what the sociologists call ‘proletarianisation’.

The aim of expansion in the 1960s was to take advantage of long wasted human potential amongst lower middle class and working class children – to recognise, that is, the economic role of Higher Education for economic growth, and for the generation and realisation of corporate profitability. The expansions of the last twenty-five years has been part of a similar drive, and one linked to a redefinition of worthwhile research and valuable training. It is an expansion justified on the grounds of fairness but driven by a neo-liberal agenda of providing the highly skilled workforce that is required without the associated costs – to privatise HE provision by imposing the cost partly on graduating students, and partly on the employees in the sector by ratcheting up productivity.

These are the issues addressed by Professor Callinicos in his pamphlet. He places the recent expansion in its economic, international and historical contexts; he looks at the drive for the rationalisation and concentration of university research; he addresses the consequences for staff and for students. All are addressed as elements of an over-arching neo-liberal agenda whose central agency domestically is the New Labour Government, and whose ‘inspiration’ was the ‘modernising project’ of Brown and Blair.

The final chapter of the text registers our resources of hope in this situation. Firstly, the evidence from France, from March and April 2006, that such policies in education can be arrested by determined and imaginative resistance. Secondly, the evidence from around the world of a growing resistance to neo-liberalism in general. Thirdly, the evidence

from the UK of a growing militancy inside higher education from both the existence and the ambitions of the UCU.

Prefaced by the remarks of Paul Mackney, Joint General Secretary of the UCU, this pamphlet provides the beginning of an argument that will come to characterise the experience of the next decade in British higher education. The interesting paradox in reading it is the growing realisation that, in respect of its analysis, there would be little disagreement voiced against it by Peter Mandelson, by Gordon Brown by the sub-luminaries of the HEFCE or by any of the thrusting and risible managers of Any University plc. All would agree that the bottom line is that HE's justification can only be in respect of universities' contribution to corporate profitability and GDP. Such readers would have no nostalgia for the idea of a liberal university committed to disinterested knowledge seeking and its dissemination. The disagreement these readers and the author arises as soon as the assessment of that rationale is made. Callinicos celebrates the expansion and the educational opportunity afforded to a larger proportion of the generations; he is in equal measure condemnatory of the style of that expansion, and excoriating in his treatment of the hypocrisy of its architects.

What Callinicos does not do is to elaborate on what an expanded university system would be like once freed from the constraints of capital accumulation and commodity production. This pamphlet may not be the place for such speculation. As any good academic will have become tired of replying to petulant opponents – critique is its own justification, and does not require a blueprint of the alternative. Yet, from a Professor of social theory who is persuaded (as he declares in earlier work) of the need for socialist critics of the exiting order to fill in their vision of our feasible utopia, we might expect something of this kind. Perhaps it will appear elsewhere.

Is the university of the future to be founded on liberal principles, on an emendation of those principles, or on other principles entirely? Is it to be open to all, or open to those qualified, or open to those who can demonstrate a need? Will it be a genuinely universal system for the interrogation of the knowledges of all disciplines, or will it be stratified and segmented? And what constraints upon it, in this future order, should the ineluctable economics of scarcity impose? These are questions to which all radical educationalists must return. Not the least value of Professor Callinicos' pamphlet is that he has provoked them anew.

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Callinicos, A. *Universities in a Neoliberal World*, Bookmarks, London, 2006 (with a Preface by Paul Mackney, Joint General Secretary of the UCU)