

A failure of imagination

David Ridley *criticises the Convention for H.E.'s standpoint.*

Rebuilding HE in the wake of the coronavirus requires having the right tools for the job. As I've argued before (1), what is needed is a serious and practical theory of marketisation, to show what is really going on, and therefore what is required for effective social and political action, and the creation of effective demands to guide this action.

Since the 2007-08 financial crisis, I have argued, HE has been viewed by the Tories as a way to rescue the neoliberal economy from long-term stagnation, providing both the next generation of skilled workers - which can be employed on insecure contracts, thanks to the successful war on trade unions in the 1980s and the over-production of graduates since 2010 - and 'innovation', ie publicly subsidised R&D for the investment-shy private sector (2).

The coronavirus pandemic is a gift to the Government's HE strategy, because *consolidation, not competition, is the real goal of marketisation* (3). Competition is saved for the global capitalist market. On the world stage, HE is just one export among others, with nation states competing and collaborating with multi-national corporations for market share in key sectors, to secure economic prosperity for their citizens. Imperialism is the logic of the globalised economy, and HE is for governments a way to exert 'soft power' over developing nations.

When the current crisis is put in this wider context, it becomes clear that a nostalgic longing a post-war golden age of (restricted and elitist) public HE - a model that was, in fact, substantially informed by Cold War politics - is inadequate. Today, the public good is defined not just by social and economic citizenship, but by the future survival of all life on earth, including mankind.

The coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown have been painful, and potentially devastating to universities. But we have been presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink the way we live, particularly how we produce and consume. Most importantly, we have been shown what it might be like to seriously reduce our carbon emissions to the levels set out by the United Nations (4), for example.

Only a global social movement, driven 'from below' by trade unions integrated within local and regional citizens' assemblies, can force nation states to transform their economies to prioritise social and environmental needs over corporate interests, and to cooperate with other nation states to deliver a global, socially just, Green New Deal. All of our existing

institutions will need to be converted to contribute to this goal, not just universities, but also FE colleges, which will be required to retrain people to deliver this transition.

Yes, a Tory government with a strong majority makes this task even more difficult. But we don't need to wait for government permission to democratise our universities. If our universities fail, we should take control and turn them into 'ecological universities'; hubs of collective intelligence, with students, academics and staff working 'with and for' the community, solving social and ecological problems through co-operation, mutual aid and political and social mobilisation (5).

We must remember that governments are never as secure as they seem. Taking control means making the destruction of HE and our universities into a political problem that neither the government, nor the public, can ignore (6). We should not be limiting our imagination to what is possible, as defined by those whose interests lie in keeping things as they are. We should, as Che Guevara said, have the courage to 'be realistic, and demand the impossible', and back up our demands with political organisation.

1. Ridley, 'Why we need a theory of marketisation', in *PSE* 96.

2. See Ridley (2019) *Markets, Monopolies and Municipal Ownership*, available at hemarketisation.wordpress.com/pamphlet.

3. See David Willetts, *A University Education*, quoted in my 'Willetts the Conqueror' series: 'One reason why I was so keen on promoting alternative providers was that I hoped at least one big British-based global higher education chain would emerge. But there was no sign of this.' (p317).

4. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has suggested that limiting global warming to 1.5C would require global net human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) to fall 'by about 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching 'net zero' around 2050'.

5. See Ridley (2020), 'Four (big) steps to save our universities': weownit.org.uk/blog/four-big-steps-to-save-our-universities.

6. For example, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' dispute in the early 1970s, along with the Miners' Strike, contributed to the downfall of Edward Heath's Tory government in 1974.