

Day of reckoning

Danny Dorling

Universities helped foster the environment in which Brexit became possible. It is time to make amends.

The UK's higher education system helped create the Brexit mess. We taught the politicians who have led the debacle. We sat back and watched as the nations of the UK became ever more socially and economically divided from the 1980s onwards. We benefited from the growing fear that without a university degree your child would be consigned to a life of low pay and drudgery.

Those who ran our universities took more and more for themselves—arguing that they were now running large businesses and so deserved to be handsomely rewarded. We provided succour to the belief that Britain could “go it alone” with our endless press releases about all the incredible innovations our universities were fostering, which would soon result in so many new companies and new jobs being created.

We lapped up ridiculous university rankings that proclaimed our “leading institutions” were among the very best in the world, and by doing so we helped spread the message that the UK was so very great that it could take back control and ascend again to its rightful place astride the world stage. We—if we stand back and take a long, hard look at ourselves—have become a large part of the problem.

Selling snake oil

Yes, opposition to Brexit has been rife in university cities. Vice-chancellors were almost unanimous in their support for staying in the European Union. They knew we received more research funding per head from the EU for science and medicine than any other group of universities in Europe. They knew that students from the European mainland tipped the balance in making so many of their businesses profitable rather than loss-making. They also knew that the UK’s own children were so badly taught in languages that very few dared travel abroad and take advantage of the essentially free higher education available elsewhere in Europe.

The vice-chancellors knew that without so many willing researchers and professors coming from mainland Europe, any pretence about the UK’s educational pre-eminence would be a charade and we would be selling snake oil at a very high price to the more gullible of overseas students.

Vice-chancellors did not want us to leave the EU. But senior management helped foster the environment in which it became possible. When £1,000 university tuition fees in England were first proposed, they did nothing. When those fees rose to £3,000 a year, they took the money gratefully. When it was suddenly announced that £9,000 a year was to be charged, they were positively gleeful.

Almost immediately, the vast majority of universities charged the most they could. The English higher education system as a whole suddenly found itself with a billion more pounds to spend than a few years before. Vanity projects abounded—shiny new buildings, expanded senior management teams—in ignorance of, or with no care for, the consequences.

Bad behaviour

High university fees lock in future income inequality. They are only sustainable if most students take out loans—a system that only works if future graduates continue to be paid considerably more than their peers who do not go to university.

The highest-paid 10 per cent of people in the UK **take home two-fifths of the total salary bill, leaving three-fifths for the other 90 per cent**. That is the highest rate of income inequality in any of the EU28 member states. The mean average member of the 10 per cent is paid six times as much as the mean average member of the 90 per cent. The lure of UK universities became the lure of having a chance to make it into that top 10. Of course, most graduates will not fit into that group; it is too small. But hope springs eternal, and our universities have privately and quietly fed off that hope and greed, while lauding their charitable status and good deeds publicly. Nowhere else in Europe does higher education behave in this way.

Many of the sins of the past have come to haunt us today. Theresa May, the prime minister who had to try to make Brexit work, was taught at her university that some children—children like her, of course—had much more potential than others and should be sought out at an early age and educated differently. At university, May was groomed for the final honours school by her tutor Marjorie Sweeting, who spotted what she thought was May's potential early on.

My colleague Sally Tomlinson, an honorary fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, has spent a lifetime looking at the implications of treating children differently. Together we have just published the book *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of empire*, in which we delve into the prime minister's past and that of her many cabinet ministers in an attempt to better understand them.

We found that they were mostly taught at particular schools where and when good breeding and the empire and its achievements were lauded, and Britain (or rather England) was presented as the model for the rest of the world to follow. They entered an extremely small social circle of mutual reinforcement from which they have never escaped. Step into their shoes, look through their eyes and you see the world through a very distorted lens from a very odd vantage point.

Time to choose

The day of reckoning is now. We have a choice. We can continue along the road of providing the most expensive and elitist higher education in all of Europe. But taking that road would be akin to the choice Americans made to have the most expensive but also the most divisive healthcare system in the world. The overall health outcomes for the United States are not good: they suffer the **lowest life expectancy** and **highest infant mortality rates** of anywhere in the rich world.

When we in the UK measure ability at age 24, we find that young British adults rank among the lowest in Europe in terms of problem-solving and mathematical and literary acumen (see *Rule Britannia*, page 91). We can continue to claim we are the best, or we can face our own Dorian Gray-like shockingly deteriorated image—the image the rest of the world sees increasingly clearly as Brexit unravels.

Higher education is a right, not a privilege. It must be provided free at the point of delivery and paid for by general taxation. The system at present only provides free education to the children of the richest tenth of adults, who pay their offspring's fees upfront. The other 90 per cent are saddled with loans that will hang around their necks for most of their lives—or until **the kind of jubilee I have described elsewhere.**

Like their counterparts in most of mainland Europe and in much of Scotland, our universities need to be an integral part of their cities, not a citadel on the hill or a walled fortress in the centre of town. And yes, some universities in England do so much better than others on this front, but please don't write and tell me how much you are doing for the community until you realise that you should be part of that community, that the students you teach should come from that community, and that the message you spread should be one of community.

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