David Watson 1949–2015: A life in higher education

A seminar to reflect on David Watson's many and varied contributions to higher education policy, scholarship, and practice was held at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London on 12 November 2015. The principal speakers were Paul Ashwin, Bahram Bekhradnia, Mike Boxall, Rob Cuthbert, Brenda Gourley, Alison Kennell, and Peter Scott. This paper offers a summary of their talks and also attempts to reflect contributions from other participants. Given the extent of editorial licence needed to bring these varied contributions together in what I hope is a reasonably concise and consistent form, responsibility for what follows must rest with me.

Paul Temple
UCL Institute of Education, University College London

David Watson's work in context

David Watson was one of the great figures in UK higher education of the last fifty years. He played many roles consummately – teacher, researcher, institutional leader, policy analyst, indeed policymaker. One of the many remarkable things about him is that he relinquished academic leadership in order to return to being what he described as a humble professor – one of only a tiny number of people to have done so.

He worked for the first part of his career in what he always called public-sector higher education – the colleges of higher education and the polytechnics – and was always quick to draw attention to the important achievements of these institutions in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain. He was proud to have played a part in their development, and that of the Council for National Academic Awards, the awarding body for their degrees.

He was a noted analyst and implementer of policy, but those roles are not separable from his role as an academic. He insisted on academic rigour in policymaking. If policy papers did not have references to previous work and bibliographies then they were incomplete and not to be trusted.

He was particularly influential in the development of national policies for teaching and learning in higher education. He was a key figure in the development of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), created by the Economic and Social Research Council, and he went on to chair that programme, and steer it towards evidence that would support the development of policy.

David also brought a strong moral perspective to the development of policy. He had a highly developed sense of fairness and moral direction, and this sense of fairness – fairness both towards individuals and institutions and more generally – pervaded all that he said and did in relation to policy development. He was clear that the development of policy is not a morally neutral process, and it is fitting that his final book should have been on *The Question of Conscience*.

David was a member of pretty well every significant national higher education body through the 1990s. In addition to the Dearing Committee, he was first a member of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), and then the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and was there at the critical time when the polytechnic and university sectors were being amalgamated. He – with Graeme Davies, the distinguished HEFCE Chief Executive – was influential in achieving what was a remarkably smooth and trouble-free transition. He recognized that the aspirations of the polytechnics for significantly increased research funding were misplaced and the amalgamation took place with virtually no additional funding for research. Nevertheless he insisted that, as universities, former polytechnics could not be research-free zones and so proposed 'DevR' – the pot of money that was set aside for encouraging the development of research in key areas in the new universities. This reflected his realization that universities are not homogeneous, but that they contain various components, some of which are strong and some of which are weak. That of course greatly influenced his insistence that students choosing not to go to Russell Group or other highly ranked universities, because they chose to select a university with strengths in the subjects in which they were interested, were neither misinformed nor perverse.

As a member of HEFCE, he was one of a small group brought together to develop a funding formula that would be fair and acceptable to both parts of the new sector. He also recognized, articulated, and provided the basis for responding to the difference in the approach of the two former sectors to the provision and funding of continuing education – without that, continuing education would have been severely compromised in the new funding arrangements. He was also instrumental in introducing what came to be known as third-stream funding, to recognize and encourage the involvement of universities in reaching out to the wider world, which of course he saw as a key role.

A visionary institutional leader

Leaders in higher education appear on various stages – notably the scientific, scholarly, and research stage; the national stage; and the institutional stage. Although these stages are not separate but interconnected – it is the interconnections between them that sometimes offer interesting and important features – we consider here David's career on the last of these stages.

The institutional stage is important because simply to perform on the national/policy stage without being rooted in institutions can lead to a vain (and possibly empty) play. Often, political leaders, and their policy acolytes, have limited understanding of the university equivalent of what

Clausewitz called the 'friction of war', but also of the sheer creativity of institutional life. All too often, this is reduced to questions of mere 'implementation'. There are some vice-chancellors who see their institutional status as a licence to strut on the national policy stage. David was never like that – although his contributions to national policymaking were exceptionally significant.

Assessing the contribution of a single individual to an institution is difficult. One difficulty may be that institutional leadership has become a poor relation to policy leadership, certainly under the increasingly politicized circumstances in which higher education now finds itself. A second difficulty is that institutional achievements do not leave such a clear documentary trail as the publications of a scholar or membership of national committees. The documents that do exist, strategic plans for example, give little impression of the energy and imagination that they so inadequately represent. But there is also third difficulty. Institutional life is a collective enterprise within which individual performances as teachers or researchers are called to life. Even the leaders of institutions are members of teams – perhaps 'especially' rather than 'even' in the case of the best leaders, because it is their responsibility to create meaning and develop momentum out of a diversity of impulses. She, or he, is inevitably the leader of a coalition, and it is their example more than their authority that buttresses their leadership. And these teams, these coalitions, are widely distributed, inevitably so in universities in which autonomy and freedom are primary goods. David realized and acted on these essential truths.

The trajectory of David's career can be quickly described. After what he himself would have acknowledged was a privileged education, his first job in Britain was at Crewe and Alsager College. Although it may be difficult to recall forty years later, the colleges of education were exciting places then, in a ferment of diversification and experimentation following the James Report on teacher education. He was there from 1975 until 1981, when he moved to Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University) as Dean of what was then its pioneering modular programme. After almost a decade in Oxford he moved to Brighton as the Director of Brighton Polytechnic, and later Vice-Chancellor when it became the University (although he initially retained the title of 'Director', perhaps out a desire to emphasize continuity and respect for the Polytechnic's history). Fifteen years later, in 2005, he moved to the Institute of Education (IOE) in London. His final institutional post was as Principal of Green Templeton College back in Oxford – but, of course, in the 'other' university!

All careers are shaped by chance and short-term considerations, and David's was no exception. There are, though, three common threads running through David's career, which together help to make sense of his role as an institutional leader.

His first post at Crewe and Alsager College had a different layer of significance back in 1975. With the (dubious) benefits of hindsight, his first academic home may appear something of an anomaly, an initial posting on the fringes of higher education before he joined the mainstream. But, as already noted, in the post-James years the colleges of education were briefly among the most educationally exciting places to be – more exciting than the 'new' universities of the 1960s, where the utopian ambitions of their founders were already beginning to fade, or even the new polytechnics, which were still settling down after the difficulties of forced mergers. The colleges in contrast had exciting and, crucially, open futures – or so it seemed until they were cut short (and down) by the closures of the late 1970s.

When David joined his second institutional home, Oxford Polytechnic, it had not yet settled down into a comfortable existence as Oxford's second university. Its future was also open and exciting. At Brighton, he rode the transition from polytechnic to university with much greater success than many other 'transitional' directors, turning it into the very successful university it remains without compromising the institution's core values. At both Oxford and Brighton, David was one of the very few who could imagine the bright future that lay ahead for the polytechnics,

now, as the so-called 'post-1992' universities, one of the most significant components of contemporary higher education in the UK, and to help realize that future.

His next two institutional homes appeared to break away from this 'public-sector' mould. But both really reflected his commitment to particular forms of higher education. At the Institute of Education, it was typical of David that, unlike most former vice-chancellors, he was not only prepared but enthusiastic about being, once again, a teacher; and he also demonstrated (and practised) his commitment to improving the standing and quality of higher education management. Even Green Templeton was originally on the margins of the University of Oxford, founded to provide a college base for the growing numbers of academic staff in medicine, the biosciences, and latterly business and management. Of course, it would be going much too far to paint David as an 'alternative' man, but nevertheless he remained loyal to a wider vision of the possibilities of higher education than was then, and is now, current among the university establishment.

The second thread running through his institutional life was a commitment to, and enthusiasm for, education. The formative experience of most institutional leaders now is as researchers. David's scholarly and research record, of course, was impeccable, but his formative experience was as an educator. At Crewe and Alsager, he was introduced to the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), probably the most effective instrument we have ever had for spreading 'good practice' round the system. David remained engaged with the CNAA almost to the end, for 16 years. Then at Oxford he was responsible for developing the modular degree programme, sadly abandoned later, and turned it into one of the most important curriculum innovations in higher education in the last forty years, combining an interdisciplinary and problem-solving philosophy with a commitment to broadening student choice – themes that still resonate today. In a fundamental sense, David was always a teacher – and proud to be one.

A third thread was David's commitment to community engagement, discussed in more detail later in this paper. But it is important to recognize that his commitment was first of all practical (and institutionally rooted) and only second intellectual, because it was at Brighton that he built up a network of links between the university and its local communities, organized through the Community University Partnership Programme, very much a pathfinder initiative. Admittedly, most universities can casually boast of such links nowadays. But it is still comparatively rare for these links to be as central to an institution's mission as they became at Brighton under David's leadership – and even rarer that they are embraced within a wider intellectual (and research) framework.

It is largely thanks to David that 'engagement' is now such a prominent component of higher education policy and of so many universities' strategies. As with so many things, he gave 'engagement' a new meaning, much wider and more creative than the rather formulaic listing of 'links' between universities and communities and business. It is significant that David was President, and such a strong supporter, of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning. He was one of a small number of key individuals who breathed new life into old-style adult education, its practices perhaps outdated but its values more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century.

To summarize, and celebrate, David's institutional achievements is not an easy task. Institutional achievements are collective achievements: they rarely leave a trail that can be simply traced back to particular individuals (although there have been many, especially at Brighton, that have David's fingerprints all over them). But there is another difficulty. To chop up a lifetime of achievements into neat components is to splinter what must be seen as a whole – and also perhaps to emphasize these splinters, or components, at the expense of the interconnections ('networks') between institutional life, policymaking, research and scholarship, and teaching. What was so special about David was that he had equal experience of, and great achievements in, all of these.

In a real sense he was his own 'network', as David the institutional leader fed into, and was fed by, David the policymaker and David the researcher, scholar, and teacher. He was strong in all these domains, which set him apart from nearly all his peers and contemporaries. He truly lived an examined life – meaning that he did not simply reflect in a passive and detached way on his various experiences, but that he examined them in an active and engaged way. For that example we will always be in his debt.

An outward-looking university

As David Watson argued, the academic community is often more ready to analyse and campaign about what is being done to it than about what it does for students and society. He railed against this kind of institutional introspection throughout his career, and consistently challenged his fellow university leaders to recognize their roles and responsibilities in the wider world. A recurrent theme of his writing was to remind his university peers of their historical place and current responsibilities as members of local and wider communities of learning. In this mission, he applied his unique talents as a teacher and in particular the core principles that recurred through his teaching – from personal to global levels.

What are those principles? Here is a list. (Several speakers noted David's fondness for lists: 'Let's make a list!' was a favoured response of his to queries of all kinds – which of course challenged the questioner to help answer their own question, while simultaneously acknowledging that it was both valid and interesting.)

Principle 1: Know your history

As an historian, David always sought to place higher education developments and issues in their historical context. He was fond of quoting Elizabeth de Burgh, the founder in 1359 of his alma mater, Clare College Cambridge, to the effect that the purpose of the new college was to be, and still is 'the discovery and sharing of the "precious pearl of learning"'. The important part of this quotation for David was the bit about sharing the benefits of learning with the wider world. This was particularly so with regard to universities' civic engagement with their local and wider communities, and their responsibilities with regard to the intellectual and material well-being of those communities. Far from being a new development, he reminded us that civic engagement represents a return to the missions on which most universities were originally founded but that many seem to have forgotten. As he put it, 'university leaders can be extraordinarily ignorant (or perhaps just tactically amnesiac) about what their institutions were originally put there to do.' David's work would carefully show how in some respects we have been here before and how there were some new aspects to the situation. He would be damning of the refusal to learn from history, whether this was the failure to learn the lessons from Individual Learning Accounts when removing the cap from student numbers, or to learn from the DipHE scheme when introducing foundation degrees. He appreciated that higher education researchers equally need to know their own history and to be fully aware of how their research relates to what has gone before so that they do not over-claim and thus undermine their contributions to knowledge.

Commenting on David's ideas, Paul Manners, the Director of the UK National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, writes:

> He allowed us to imagine new possibilities and to see them worked through in reality: new ways of organizing university research and teaching that embedded deep, thoughtful interaction with the wider world; leadership which placed engagement at the heart of university strategy … Of particular resonance (for me) was the way David, as an historian, helped us to understand how

richly the past can illuminate the present, and to place our contemporary efforts in a longer term perspective. Equally importantly ... he opened our eyes to the global context for our work, and opened up new friendships and connections.

Principle 2: Know yourself

David's work is clear that higher education researchers and scholars need to understand the position from which they are arguing and the ways in which their arguments are informed by their own interests. David was a passionate advocate of the power of higher education to transform lives but he was equally passionate that if we are going to claim that higher education is personally transformational then we need genuinely to know how this works. What is the nature of this transformation? Why does it take place? Is higher education a necessary condition for this transformation? Is it a sufficient condition? Do all forms of higher education lead to this transformation? These questions underlie much of the work of higher education studies.

Principle 3: Higher education is a system, not a sector

David hated – not too strong a word – the factionalism and one-upmanship that characterizes much of higher education today. He lamented the ways in which universities have become obsessed with promoting and protecting their perceived status and reputation, forming themselves into self-selecting, exclusive 'gangs', as he called them, of asserted superiority over their peers.

Principle 4: Acknowledge the responsibilities of academic life

David prized the demanding values that underpin academic life – honest enquiry, critical self-examination, scholarly integrity, and inclusive collegiality. But he questioned whether the academic community is always as good at applying these disciplines to its external relationships as it is within its peer groups. Moreover, he was critical of the use of those values to justify the distancing of the academy from the 'real worlds' of commercial and civic life.

Academic values, and the freedom to pursue them, are often cited as a reason for universities and academics to maintain their distance from the state and commerce, avoiding the inevitable compromises that civic engagement must make with the ideals of Newman and von Humboldt. David rejected this dichotomy. He saw academic values rather as the source of the academy's responsibilities to the wider communities that they live within and that they expect to sustain them. As he put it, 'There can be no academic freedom without academic duty.'

Principle 5: Ask, but also answer, the difficult questions

David often wrote about how we are compelled by an authentic higher education to practise answering difficult questions. He also often answered such questions himself: Is there still a higher education system? What does post-institutional higher education look like? The key here is the focus on answering these questions. Critique on its own is not enough. Higher education researchers need to offer realistic and workable alternatives rather than simply to say what is wrong with current arrangements and policies.

Principle 6: Language matters

Another recurring theme in David's teaching was the highlighting and demolition of 'category errors' and other forms of lazy rhetoric, which he saw as feeding a number of pathologies in higher education policymaking. On his hit list of category errors were the concept of 'world-classness' (interpreted as peer-group prestige) as a basis for asserting and ranking educational excellence, and the privileging of research over all other university tasks.

These principles – historical and self-knowledge, higher education as an open system, acknowledging academic responsibilities, critiquing yet proposing, and avoiding crooked thinking – provide us with strong foundations for rethinking – David would say, rediscovering – the place and role of universities in the twenty-first-century learning economy.

Pursuing the notion of engagement, David proposed three complementary domains of the civic engagement of universities.

What he called first-order engagement 'arises from the university just being there'. As major employers and spenders in their localities, as the focus for large and diverse numbers of students and staff, as communities of scholars, and as centres for a host of cultural activities, universities are inevitably highly important civic citizens – quite often the most important economic and social players in their region. This mode of engagement positions universities as *anchor institutions in their communities*. It places significant responsibilities on them to behave well and to ensure that their local impacts are as positive as possible – something David was not convinced they always do.

The second order of civic engagement, as David put it, relates to universities' contractual relationships with the wider world: producing graduates with the skills and attributes sought by employers, and transferring research-based knowledge to industry, policymakers, and public services. This is the domain of the *entrepreneurial university*, justifying its worth and earning its keep through the economic and societal impacts of its activities, whether through its 'core' teaching and research or through 'third stream' traded services.

Universities inevitably walk a fine line in this domain between the protection of academic ideals and their responsibilities to those paying the piper, and indeed keeping themselves financially afloat. David proposed this dilemma being reconciled in a third-order domain – the university as part of an extended and inclusive stakeholder community involving academics, students, other staff, and a whole universe of external partners with shared interests in the values and benefits of the higher education project. This is the domain of *cooperative endeavour* between the academy and its civic stakeholders, collaborating to address complex social and economic problems, for mutual and shared benefits.

When we consider the recent history of the relationship between higher education and civic society in the UK – which has in practice meant that between the university sector and central government – this third-order domain looks almost utopian. Over the past twenty years, we have seen the focus of that relationship move from first-order engagement – where universities were valued and funded essentially for being there, key parts of civic society – to a portfolio of marketized second-order contracts based on the instrumental benefits delivered to paying client groups. If now we want to see David's third domain in action, we have to look to Northern Europe, for example to the so-called 'triple-helix' alliances between universities, industry, and regional government in the Netherlands, or the integration of local universities into civic development planning in Denmark.

As what is becoming known in England as 'devo' – the devolution of responsibilities for economic and social welfare to new city–regional partnerships – gains momentum, it is becoming clear that there is a higher education-shaped hole within the civic development strategies being

proposed across the country. Shortages of highly skilled and creative problem solvers, and of innovative problem-solving relationships, are emerging as the biggest constraints to economic growth and social well-being. The new 'devo' structures and powers open real opportunities for universities to engage in collaborative partnerships with their local communities to address these challenges, precisely in the spirit of David's third-order model of civic engagement.

David's insistence on the importance of universities reaching out beyond their boundaries led him to take a leading role in the Talloires Network, an international association of higher education institutions committed to civic engagement. It envisions universities around the world as dynamic forces in their societies, incorporating civic engagement and community service into their research and teaching missions. The universities that belong to the network have committed to the recommendations of the Talloires Declaration and have built, and continue to build, a global movement of engaged universities.

David invited the network to agree that 'the standards of excellence, critical debate, scholarly research, and peer judgment (should be) applied as rigorously to community engagement as they are to other forms of scholarship'. He had long held this view, and written about it in articles and in his book entitled *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*. He was what the higher education scholar Chris Duke described as 'a natural co-founder of Talloires, one of the rare breed of vice-chancellors who fully practise the community engagement that they preach'.

Larry Bacow, then President of Tufts University in the US and a Talloires founder, paid tribute as follows:

> I learned a great deal from David, not just about how to bend the arc of an institution towards engagement and social justice, but also about leadership more broadly. He had an uncanny way of pointing the group in the right direction, either through a profound question (typically stated elegantly and simply) or through a quietly expressed but extremely insightful observation. When David spoke, the rest of us typically said out loud or to ourselves, 'of course!'

The result of this particular project was the book *The Engaged University: International perspectives on civic engagement*, published in 2011 and co-authored with Rob Hollister, Susan Stroud, and Elizabeth Babcock. Aligned to the goals of the Network as Larry Bacow writes:

> This work educates future leaders for change, mobilizes university professors and students to address pressing societal challenges ... University enrolment worldwide is predicted to surpass 200 million by the year 2030. This book offers a glimpse of what these students, in collaboration with their teachers and institutions, can do to accelerate economic development and build healthy communities around the world.

David was driven by his belief that the global North had much to learn from the South, and the West from the East. Indeed, he was convinced that the engagement agenda was being pursued in many countries of the global South in a far more sincere and creative way than was the case in the North. He was in no doubt that we could and should learn from each other.

An inspiring teacher and mentor

David Watson respected students. He trusted students to make rational decisions, whether about their choice of university or subject, or more generally. He once spoke at a Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) seminar under the title 'Students are not what they used to be – and never were!' One of the things of which he said that he was proudest at HEPI – he was a member of the HEPI Advisory Board from its creation – was the introduction of its annual survey of the student academic experience, of which he was a prime mover, and among the findings of which was that students at so many universities apparently got a bad deal. He was of course careful

not to equate the amount of teaching with good teaching, but he nevertheless said, 'We have provided the evidence, now let Bristol explain why it's okay that their students can expect so much less by way of staff contact than a student studying the same subject at another university – even another Russell Group university.' Providing the evidence – as far as David was concerned – was half the job done: the debate and the policy had to follow.

Students following the IOE's MBA programme in higher education management have said that they looked forward immensely to David's sessions, blending as they did the theoretical, the philosophical, and the highly practical. He was convinced that the fundamental value of effective teaching was one of the (not necessarily tangible or explicit) draws in attracting bright people into academic life. It was certainly something that attracted him: it was as an undergraduate reading history at Cambridge that he decided that he wanted to become a teacher in higher education – not an academic, a manager, or a leader, but a teacher.

Students remarked that it was humbling to engage in any session with him and discover that his interest was as much in what they had to contribute as in imparting his wisdom to them – this reflected his belief that higher education was not about the transmission of knowledge but about an evolving 'conversation' between more and less experienced learners. His sessions were characterized by an ability to draw on a wide range of historical and philosophical material and combine this with insights into particular topics informed by his (equally wide) experiences as an academic, a Dean, in working with sector-related bodies, and ultimately as a Vice-Chancellor and then Principal of an Oxford college. He understood the reality of the 'day job' and the need for 'bite-size' lessons that would travel with students.

One former student's personal memory is of David's response when she contacted him in 2013 on a professional matter. She felt hesitant about disturbing the Principal of an Oxford college and wondered if he would even remember who she was. She need not have worried, though – within a very short space of time she received an apparently delighted and personal response, full of David's characteristic easy warmth. It was an act of personal kindness that was typical of him and illustrative of his concern for, and interest in, people (as distinct from processes and systems).

It is easy to think of teaching as being about the discipline, the subject matter, the right 'answers'. What David showed in his teaching is that the best teaching goes beyond that and recognizes the human interactions that take place when we learn. And this means understanding not just the students but oneself. Perhaps David's ability to demonstrate this lesson is also evident in the 'human scale' of his solutions: sometimes academic writing feels too far removed from the everyday realities that we face to be useable – more relevant to a Platonic world of 'ideas' than the real world of 'shadows' that we inhabit. David's use of lists and sets of contradictions in his teaching were 'human-sized' ideas that could be grasped and pocketed for use in the office and around the boardroom table.

Despite his vast reservoir of knowledge and experience, David rarely presented himself as an 'expert' on a particular topic but as a fellow learner who was perhaps just a bit further down the road (or a little higher up the hill and therefore able to see a bit more clearly) than others. He acted as a trusted guide, modelling positive behaviours and helping us to learn some important life and professional lessons, rather than handing over a 'Watson manual' to higher education practice. In one of many tributes paid to David soon after his death, Rob Cuthbert, quoting a citation for David's SRHE Fellowship said 'we could see everything that we valued embodied in that one person'. David embodied integrity and encouraged self-reflection with no agenda beyond a belief in delivering a greater good through higher education and a belief that we as individuals have the power of 'self-creation' as opposed to a more deterministic 'self-discovery'.

David has shown us that there is that there is much in common between good leadership and good teaching:

- we feel challenged yet supported
- we feel empowered (the capacity for self-creation) yet constrained (we rule out certain things or accept that certain things have been ruled out).

When talking about 'essential teacher attributes' he said that: 'You have to motivate other people to want not to disappoint you.' David would have been proud to know that there are many people who, as a consequence of his teaching, continue to be motivated by not wanting to disappoint him.

Championing social justice

David Watson had a permanent commitment to the values of what he was proud to call 'public-sector higher education' – or, more broadly, higher education that was not ashamed to cater for the masses rather than simply the elites. This was clear at Crewe and Alsager College, at Oxford Polytechnic, and at Brighton University. He was passionate about widening participation in higher education, and in adult education in particular. He was the first to point out that widening participation depends fundamentally on allowing the system to grow. In his words, 'You will never persuade the middle classes to give up their privileges, so the only way to get more disadvantaged students into higher education is by expanding the system.' So David was a passionate supporter of expansion, and in that context he saw that some level of student fees was a necessary part of the process of ensuring that there was adequate funding to enable that.

It was in this context too that he reacted to the then Secretary of State David Blunkett's 2001 injunction to HEFCE to 'bear down on non-completion', at a time when the evidence showed that non-completion in England was one of the lowest in the Western world, that non-completion was closely related to the level of previous educational attainment, and that therefore the only way of 'bearing down', short of a large injection of funds to support students at risk (which of course he would have supported), would be to restrict entry to higher education. It was the lack of grasp of the evidence and the policy implications, and the implications for equity of what was essentially a political injunction that he objected to so much. He did of course see non-completion as a critical issue for widening participation, particularly given that most students who drop out are from poor backgrounds. After all, together with Maria Slowey, he wrote the book on the 'education lifecourse' and argued strongly at HEFCE for recognition in the funding method of the greater cost of providing successfully for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It was David who characterized fair access and widening participation as on the one hand a small problem – students not going, or often not choosing to go, to Oxford, Cambridge, or a Russell Group university – and on the other hand a big problem of getting more people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education at all. And David also described participation as a class issue, but not because of admission decisions. He said that the 'class effect bites throughout compulsory schooling, with the die being almost fully cast by GCSE'.

David was a well-known critic of the mission groups and the league-table mentality that sustains them, noting that their claims to superiority are often contradicted by the evidence, whether of research standing or teaching quality. But he was much more concerned that their activities created artificial barriers and exclusions within the education system that closed access and opportunities for whole cohorts of potential learners. He was particularly disturbed by the lack of opportunities for personal progression through lifelong learning and movement

between providers, and with the artificial segmentation of provision between further, higher, and vocational learning. In David's view, we should regard the university system as part of an open-ended, student-centred, and borderless system of tertiary learning, and not as a club for self-protecting institutions.

The current proposed Teaching Excellence Framework would certainly have engaged David's concern. On the one hand, he was keen to create a totem as powerful and seductive as the Research Assessment Exercise and its successor. But it is not as if that had not already been thought of by David, among others, at HEFCE – and it would have infuriated him that there was so little corporate memory in government that they would have been unaware of the work that had previously been done on this. In the past when this was discussed, he did support the notion of using teaching quality assessment to reward universities with additional places. But he was very much against giving simple financial rewards to universities judged to be excellent at teaching, for two principal reasons. First, he thought it was fundamentally unfair that a student going to a university already judged to be less good than others should find that it also had fewer resources to spend on her education. And he also objected to well-heeled universities that have more opportunity to demonstrate high quality becoming even better heeled. In passing, this question of the differential resources of universities was a matter that exercised him; and he and Rachel Bowden at Brighton, in collaboration with whom he did some of his most fruitful work, exposed this comprehensively.

David believed that the main issues facing higher education need to be solved collectively rather than individually. We therefore needed to ignore the pressures towards individualism that are supported by the reward systems of contemporary higher education. We also needed to recognize that we tend to experience a very particular version of higher education. David's work drew attention to how higher education looked from the global South and how this offered possibilities for seeing our own situation in new ways and knowing ourselves more fully.

The loss of a good friend

The tributes to David's work summarized here point to the near-impossibility of his achievements. How can anyone excel as a policy analyst, as an institutional leader, as a scholar, as a teacher and mentor, as someone with an exceptional sense of civic duty and social responsibility, and still apparently have ample time for family, friends, music, and cricket? Somehow, David made it possible.

In his policy work, perhaps three things particularly resonate. First, David's moral indignation, sometimes tipping over into contempt, for things like the 'Russell Group passengers' and the mission group 'gangs'. Second, David's consistent real concern to put 'students at the heart of the system', in contrast to the misappropriation of that term by the last government. And third, how David would never 'sit nicely' in the corridors of power, exemplified by the way David described the Browne Review and the so-called reforms of 2012 as 'amazingly incoherent'.

The threads running through David's career as a manager and leader were his commitment to the public sector and public service; commitment to the cause of education; and commitment to engagement. One vignette, recalled from a Universities UK (UUK) meeting considering the tripling of tuition fees to £3,000 under Labour, highlights these points. David suggested that a 'straw poll' be taken among the vice-chancellors present to determine UUK's stance. The reaction his suggestion provoked was worthy of a Bateman cartoon – spluttering from the platform about the need to call an emergency meeting and muttering in the body of the hall. David handled this spluttering and muttering with his customary grace. He was perhaps secretly

amused, and pleased, by the reactions he had provoked: his fellow vice-chancellors were not so much opposed to David's suggestion, as embarrassed by his forthrightness and honesty.

David's scholarship changed the perspective of many students of higher education. He had an uncanny knack of finding the most important question, and then pursuing it without fear or favour. His work is very clear that despite the very difficult challenges we face, contemporary higher education still offers something that can transform people's lives in remarkable ways. A key message of his scholarly legacy is that the privilege and joy of working in and researching higher education give us a tremendous responsibility to do it to the utmost of our abilities.

David Watson received many deserved academic honours in his lifetime. The seminar reported on here also honoured him and highlighted his prolific and positive contributions to higher education. David was an inspiring leader and colleague, a wonderful teacher and scholar, a beacon of integrity, and a speaker of truth to power. Many of us were proud to call him our friend, and grateful for his support just when we needed it most. Policy analyst, institutional leader, scholar, teacher, mentor – David Watson was all these things, and much more. The citation for a SRHE award said: 'This Fellowship recognises the improbable achievements of someone who can make you still believe in the magic of academe, and believe that the good guys sometimes win.' David Watson was, quite simply, the best friend *in* higher education, and the best friend *of* higher education, that anyone could imagine.

David Watson: A biographical note

David Watson was born on 22 March 1949 in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire. He was educated at Broxbourne Church of England Primary School, Cheshunt Grammar School, Eton College, Clare College Cambridge, and the University of Pennsylvania. He taught and managed at Minaki Secondary School, Tanzania; Germantown Friends School, Philadelphia; the University of Pennsylvania; Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education; Oxford Polytechnic; the University of Brighton; the Institute of Education, University of London; and Green Templeton College, Oxford.

He was a member of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Paul Hamlyn National Commission on Education, the Dearing Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, and Universities UK (UUK).

He was Honorary President of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), a member of the Advisory Board of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), a National Teaching Fellow, a Companion of the Chartered Institute of Management, and a Trustee of the Nuffield Foundation. He was Chair of the Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning, the Universities Association for Continuing Education, the South East England Cultural Consortium, and the Brighton Festival and Dome. He was honoured by many bodies, including the Royal College of Music and the City and Guilds Institute. He was knighted for services to higher education.

He loved his wife, family and friends, teaching and learning, writing about the history of ideas and universities, travelling, listening to and making music, and playing and watching cricket. He died peacefully at St Peter and St James Hospice, Chailey, East Sussex, on 8 February 2015.

David Watson: Key publications

(2014) *The Question of Conscience: Higher education and personal responsibility*. London: Institute of Education Press.

With David Scott, Gwyneth Hughes, Penny-Jane Burke, Carol Evans, and Catherine Walter (2013) *Learning Transitions in Higher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ed. with Robert Hollister, Susan Stroud, and Elizabeth Babcock (2011) *The Engaged University: International perspectives on civic engagement*. London: Routledge.

(2009) *The Question of Morale: Managing happiness and unhappiness in university life*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.

With Tom Schuller (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the future for lifelong learning*. Leicester: NIACE.

Ed. with Michael Amoah (2007) *The Dearing Report: Ten years on* (Bedford Way Papers). London: Institute of Education Press.

(2007) *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill and Open University Press.

With Elizabeth Maddison (2005) *Managing Institutional Self-Study*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Ed. with Maria Slowey (2003) *Higher Education and the Lifecourse*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

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(2000) *Managing Strategy*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

With Richard Taylor (1998) *Lifelong Learning and the University: A post-Dearing agenda*. London: Falmer Press.

With Jean Bocock (1994) *Managing the University Curriculum: Making common cause*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

(1992) *Arendt*. London: Fontana.

With Hazel Bines (1992) *Developing Professional Education*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

With David Scurry, John Brooks, Roger Lindsay, and Chris Coghill (1989) *Managing the Modular Course: Perspectives from Oxford Polytechnic*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

(1988) *Margaret Fuller: An American romantic*. Oxford: Berg.