

For a reader who is prepared to accept a functionalist interpretation, the direction of change and its causes are very clear. In all the case studies discussed the emergence of a knowledge intensive economy has both made the knowledge and skills embodied in universities immensely valuable to national states but at the same time it is effectively proletarianising the majority of their workers. Knowledge has become both a commodity to be traded and an important instrument of national policies. Higher education is one industry among many knowledge-based industries experiencing the traumas faced by manual workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the last analysis it is a question of who benefits and who pays. While governments continue to extract much of the costs of higher education from taxpayers it is not surprising that they consider higher education too important to be left to the professors.

But the differences in detail in the way the problem has been confronted in different countries are intrinsically interesting and the dozen or so stories in this volume are well worth reading. They are all well written and even the best-informed reader will gain something from an appreciation of the different ways the basic story can be told.

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**The trouble with higher education: a critical examination of our universities**, by Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, 168 pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN-10: 0-415-87198-0

This book's aim is to discuss some of the problems with British higher education and offer up solutions. The authors identify the main problem as mass higher education and the solution lying in liberal education. Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith (from Oxford University and Buckinghamshire New University, respectively) are both practitioners with around four decades of teaching experience in Britain and elsewhere. They make it clear that they are in favour of expansion – their argument is with the way in which it has been implemented and managed. They are of the view that mass higher education has been offered at 'as little cost as possible' and those who have suffered most are the students and teachers.

Hussey and Smith have focused their attention on the newer universities who have to compete in the market place for students, and not on the more prestigious universities who can have their pick of students. They argue that the same old elitist system has been 'stretched to suit' (2) through the introduction of modularisation and semesterisation, the rise of managerialism, obsessions with the maintenance of standards, commodification of knowledge, and the increasing marketisation of higher education. Much of this they maintain is borneoed by academics as the 'dispiriting and unrewarding burden of mass higher education' (4), and those who are suffering most are the students with dropout being the main consequence.

The first set of chapters explores these problems in more detail, specifically: the nature and effects of expansion; managerialism, and markets and consumerism; modularisation; students as consumers; learning outcomes. The other set of chapters is aimed at offering up ideas that are more positive, based on the authors' view that liberal education is the ideal form or approach to higher education.

In particular, one chapter is devoted to what the authors think universities should be and why they are valuable. They argue that universities are valuable because they serve a number of functions, which include: allowing individuals to flourish and find fulfilment; furthering society's

interests and prosperity; preserving and exercising freedom of thought and expression; providing sources of innovation and inventions; acting as repositories of knowledge and its dissemination; and being gatekeepers to the professions. However, there are also challenges in fulfilling these functions – not least the impact of the economic recession and the cost of higher education, as well as government policies, demographic, and cultural and other social changes. Nonetheless, the authors argue that to fulfil these functions there needs to be increased state funding and a return to free higher education. In return universities will need to become more efficient. Other choices will also need to be made: determining the size of the higher education sector, and higher education's relationship with the further education sector.

Another chapter argues for a student-centred approach to higher education, which recognises that students are different and therefore need to be treated differently. Such an approach they maintain would require greater flexibility in structures and processes, and that teaching must be taken seriously. Student progression would be determined by the 'transitions' that are achieved, guided by formative assessment, which would reduce dropout and reinstate pleasure in teaching. These transitions would require fostering deep and independent learning, moving away from the utilitarian attitude to learning held by many students, and social and cultural change in the life of a university. Thus, time and resources would need to be allocated according to student need and would require better staff to student ratios. All of this the authors recognise will draw much criticism, but they believe that a state of affairs needs to be created to allow for experimentation and only changes justified through evidence will be worth keeping, which they argue 'cannot truthfully be claimed for the present arrangements' (127).

The proposals and recommendations put forward in this book for the future of British higher education will be welcomed by many of those working (and especially teaching) in our universities. With other readers, however, they will jar, not least because of the far reaching cuts that the sector is being forced to make. Indeed, Hussey and Smith are clearly aware that the problems and proposals they discuss are enormous and ambitious, and what they are presenting lacks the detail and subtlety to be found in some other books on these topics. However, they believe it is sufficient for their purpose because it serves 'to point out the path we are taking ... and explain why we trudge in that direction and not others' (75). And, as a book whose aim is to be 'accessible to lay readers as well as those engaged in education' (viii), I tend to agree with them. The structure of the book is not as clear as implied by the authors, and it suffers from some lack of flow, overlap and repetition between chapters – although its virtue is that it allows the reader to dip in and out of the book. Much of what is argued is not new and not everyone will agree with Hussey and Smith's position. Nonetheless, it is an engaging and interesting contribution to the debate about the future of British higher education.

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