

Tertiary Sector Evolution – envisioning the future and how we get there

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1. Introduction and purpose of the report

This report is intended to reflect the insights, views and opinions expressed at an event convened by Advance HE in December 2021. The event provided colleagues from across a range of interested UK and Republic of Ireland education providers and sector stakeholder bodies, with an opportunity to consider the whole system that they are operating as part of; explore different experiences and perspectives, while attempting to reach some shared understandings of the challenges and opportunities involved; share thoughts and ideas about how things are shaped currently and how they might evolve in the future; and reflect on rising issues and insight into the aspirations and opportunities that lie ahead.

Advance HE is committed to help higher education be the best it can be, however the emergent discussions around and approaches to tertiary education involve and impact on a broader range of stakeholders. Currently Advance HE is seeking to convene and enable discussions with a range of those involved in this agenda to maximise opportunities for the sharing of practice and considering possibilities.

The event was attended by representatives working within tertiary education from all nations of the UK and Republic of Ireland. This included those from universities, institutes of technology, colleges, and their representative bodies and stakeholders from government bodies and agencies. The event also included three provocateurs to stimulate discussion and thinking around some strategic questions and was facilitated by Advance HE representatives. Details about the structure of the event are included in Appendix 1.

2. Tertiary education framing/definition

The word ‘tertiary’ is defined by the World Bank as “formal, post-secondary education” which is (by implication) structured and accredited by designated, approved institutions of learning. the World Bank goes on to say:

“Tertiary education refers to all formal post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools. Tertiary education is instrumental in fostering growth, reducing poverty, and boosting shared prosperity.

A highly skilled workforce, with lifelong access to a solid post-secondary education, is a prerequisite for innovation and growth: well-educated people are more employable and productive, earn higher wages, and cope with economic shocks better.

Tertiary education benefits not just the individual, but society as a whole. Graduates of tertiary education are more environmentally conscious, have healthier habits, and have a higher level of civic participation. Also, increased tax revenues from higher earnings, healthier children, and reduced family size all build stronger nations. In short, tertiary education institutions prepare individuals not only by providing them with adequate and relevant job skills, but also by preparing them to be active members of their communities and societies.”¹

This prompts one to consider what that definition excludes. It excludes an obligation to participate, it excludes informal routes to skill and knowledge acquisition, and it also reminds us that the people who are trying to engage with group tertiary education have other choices. Secondary education is compulsory; tertiary is not. It also suggests that the sector has to engage with stakeholders regarding that choice and to challenge assumptions about who post-compulsory education is for.

The idea of a higher education sector, or a tertiary sector, suggests homogeneity within and across nations. This is another assumption that we might challenge. There is huge diversity across national policy contexts within further education, within higher education and within specialist institutions, and the idea that we are all one thing is a dangerous assumption.

¹ Source: www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#1

It is more difficult if the implication is that tertiary education implies a tertiary system, not just a binary system dominated by colleges and universities while including potentially other types of education providers. A tertiary *system* implies a situation where colleges, universities and other providers interact in a way that produces a joined-up experience or set of pathways for students. There are developing tertiary institutions that are neither college nor universities in the traditional sense.

Funding then gets trickier. Most argue that they are underfunded, so one of the attractions of a tertiary system might be a harmonisation of core funding and an alignment of shareable resources, support services and regulation.

3. Tertiary sector context

The context recognised by participants was that we have a framework for people to be able to move around the tertiary sector but it isn't always that easy to navigate. We [heard this from a student](#) about the precise experience of trying to do that.

There are a few elephants in the room worth naming:

Language: the words we use to describe what we do are often confusing to ourselves and to our partners. That's a frequent phenomenon we come across in the work we do, especially with collaborations and partnerships. We need to be aware that we may not always be understood and we must be prepared to allow time and space to explore that together.

Funding: there is not enough of it, we all agree. However, this is a complex issue and it is often expressed simplistically, eg further education is cheaper to provide than higher education, and comparisons are generally not robust or helpful.

Culture: there are different assumptions across and within the sector about what our character and values are, who our stakeholders are, who our audience is and how we should organise and deliver learning. We don't all agree on that and we have very different sets of assumptions driving us and our decisions in that area.

Government control and influence: colleges, universities and institutes of technology operate under different legislative and regulatory regimes with, for example, varying degrees of financial flexibility and autonomy, coordination and direction in setting provision, or involvement in public appointment processes. It is not a clear or consistent picture. However, funding conditions and regulatory requirements mean that governments assert strong influence on all institutions.

Purpose: learning for what? How much do we assume or think about what motivates people who participate in our 'system'? What is it that they are looking for from us and what do they derive from us that is useful? In short, what is our purpose and are we consistent in aligning decisions and resources to that purpose?

4. Why this matters

Who are our stakeholders and what is material to them? That is equally challenging as we are unlikely to have a single view across some of the different nations and indeed within nations about this. What we can do is to create some understanding of what our wider stakeholder map looks like, across different national contexts. Even if it is a little formative.

Potential Learning: how can we learn and disseminate the skills required to engage effectively with stakeholders, to influence them, to work in partnership, to have dialogue about challenges we have in common? These are specific and learnable skills.

Thinking about the purpose (why this matters) is messy. We know students are a common stakeholder but not a homogenous group. Staff are a key stakeholder but not a homogenous group. Regulators, funders, employers, professions, the list will go on.

From a governance perspective the need for institutions to understand key stakeholders and what is material to them and how the institution's values and strategy speaks to them is the responsibility of the Board/Council/Court depending on the type of institution. So it follows that leadership teams need to demonstrate and articulate through clarity of purpose and engagement what the stakeholder landscape looks like and how it is changing.

All stakeholders will inevitably have a different perspective on the value that they get from being part of an education system. Among the many attempts to redefine value in the education sector, there remains a prevailing narrative that value can be measured by the level of resources obtained (teaching hours, graduate salary, etc.) for the least amount of money. Students quite legitimately ask for evidence that they are getting value from their investment in time and/or money (compared to other courses, type of provision or moving straight to/or staying in employment), but they also look for value from the opportunities offered by being part of a community and ultimately their role in society and the economy.

We also need to give serious consideration to how the sector understands and measures success. There are many diverse definitions of effectiveness, according to institutional mission and yet, increasingly, amid a proliferation of available data, we are using common and often aggregated metrics across the whole system, with the inevitable result that we draw comparisons and relative judgements about value. This is (or should be) anathema to a complex and interdependent system and yet we live by unhelpful hierarchies of perceived and assumed value that transmit themselves to the stakeholder environment with perverse consequences.

4.1 Who does this matter to?

Geography and the communities being served by tertiary education is a strong factor for all of the UK nations and Republic of Ireland. Often a true tertiary model is a natural and successful consequence of need where dispersed remote and rural communities are served. What can we learn from the pathways, support and models that are used here? We asked participants who the main stakeholders are:

- + Students
- + Schools
- + Colleges
- + All FE and HE providers as well as the state
- + Employers
- + Young people
- + Everyone thinking about education and those who might in the future
- + Government, national and local
- + Industry
- + Society/Communities
- + Qualification awarding bodies.
- + Regulatory bodies
- + Strategic and operational partners/supply chain partners.

There is scope to define motivations and drivers for all the actors and help articulate a more detailed stakeholder map.

4.2 Why does this matter?

As the World Bank points out, the metrics that determine success at the level of a nation or state, whether they be GDP focused or wellbeing oriented, are enhanced by an educated, skilled and purposeful population. The nurturing and sustaining of such a population is an aim to which a well-configured tertiary education system can make a crucial contribution. The efforts of a tertiary education system can link individual benefit to societal benefit in ways that can make it unarguably worth investing in.

The goals of an effective tertiary system might include:

To foster sustainable institutions and society

- + to enable economic growth and prosperity
- + to enable wellbeing and fulfilling lives
- + to establish and promote the value of tertiary education per se
- + to pursue efficiency in delivery, learning more about what we do and how we do it and what works
- + to disrupt skilled and educated workers in the system
- + to challenge industry and bring innovation
- + to understand risks and opportunities better
- + to better design the structures and systems that we are evolving/creating
- + to address societal and global challenges.

To support all learners to be purposeful members of society throughout their lives:

- + supporting people to achieve their goals
- + supporting learners of all ages and backgrounds
- + re-skilling/upskilling/lifelong learning/life chances/life opportunities
- + student-centred provision and journey (Because education is lifelong and people want to take different routes at different times)
- + fostering genuine parity of esteem with different pathways
- + enabling wellbeing for the learner journey.

5. Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results and Sustainability

This grid represents the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results (SOARS) articulated as part of the event about envisioning the future and how we get there. It also includes thinking about what might be needed to help sustain such an endeavour and maintain momentum.

Strengths

- + Established, trusted and well-regarded ‘brands’ within the sector.
 - + Small nations have closer access to government and other institutions.
 - + Traditionally, high value placed on education as a route to purposeful lives.
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Opportunities

- + Improve change management capability
 - + Lifelong learning - a real thing?
 - + Real partnership and stakeholder engagement.
 - + Create a space to articulate meaningful journeys for learners in common language.
 - + Meaningful could be both for learners and employers (employers includes providers of education as well).
 - + Such a space could be created collaboratively.
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Aspirations (sector next steps)

- + Articulate a learner centric system
 - + identify what works and in what context - does that translate across sectors
 - + Closing the attainment gap/s
 - + Fund learners throughout their life
 - + Micro credentials and portable funding
 - + Allow the funding to follow the learner
 - + Continuing/enhancing research led-education and innovation
 - + Properly funded system, based on its unarguable value to society
 - + Flexibility
 - + Structure learning journey to blend pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy to support development of self-determined learners
 - + Develop skills in influencing education policy
 - + Explore limits of what is possible /desirable to balance sector structures and their stability with necessarily disruptive flexibility and agility, providing a platform for innovation.
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Results

- + Identifying how we use metrics meaningfully. Measuring what matters.
 - + How can we view the Emma Wallace experience (see Appendix 1), as a good and legitimate outcome as opposed to failure?
 - + Challenge our obsession with rankings etc. in favour of distinctive, interdependent and complementary missions
 - + Seek integration rather than unification of our sector, build the right pathways and bridges within it; develop a common language of expectation and outcome.
 - + Ensuring fair access for all.
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Sustainability

- + **Personal commitment to action is needed by all involved.** An example is that stakeholders need to compare (anonymised collated) student data sets available (or deemed important) for different actors across a given tertiary system to highlight commonalities and differences.
 - + We need frameworks around flexibility - both of available learning options and pathways as well as delivery (online vs blended vs on campus) - how do we ensure that the student experience is as good as it can be and that staff are also fully engaged?
 - + Hold reference points for what the art of the possible can be for better student centric pathways, handoff and support (academic and non-academic).
 - + Sustainable sector change also means alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (or similar). Building wider understanding of environmental, social and economic sustainability among staff and students.
 - + Institutions across further education and higher education need impactful and meaningful people development at all levels to enable the change that we need. It is about skills, mind sets, and good facilitation.
 - + How can funding align to this?
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6. Issues arising from discussion

Whether provided directly to institutions or following the student as a learner budget, **funding** still drives the system into competition to 'own' the student and away from the kind of collaboration that might facilitate mobility. It is more efficient (and profitable) to chase after full-time equivalencies for fixed term programmes of study than to provide for part-time, drop-in or continuing professional development engagements in pursuit of micro-credentials.

In the minds of many students and stakeholders across the sector, there is a **status hierarchy** (social rather than technical) of institutions and types of learning. A tertiary system does little to challenge or disrupt this. Reverse articulation whereby, for example, the honours graduate seeks to acquire necessary skills via college or further education providers, remains very rare.

There is a need for transformation of staff expectations, attitudes and working practices, in short, a **significant culture change**. This is unlikely to be easy to achieve as many of these factors are both engrained and heavily defended by staff associations and unions. Changing student expectations are driving this to a state of conflict (complaints, appeals and consumerism) rather than a space of co-created solutions. There is also a mind-set change needed. **Investment in developing and upskilling staff** has been the victim of budget cuts or only seen as a legislative requirement. In order to meet the expectations of students, society and the challenges of developing a significantly different sector, the people who work within it not only need the routine training such as data protection, but real impactful personal and professional development over time in order to support and implement the change needed at all levels.

There is a need to **engage** employers, professions and other stakeholders in dialogue about how a tertiary system can be supportive of their anticipated needs. This will require a **clarification of the purpose(s)** of tertiary education and its value to the economy and society.

7. Concluding observations

The changes required to make tertiary education truly effective are vast and fundamental. Our existing education systems, which are all at different points along a continuum of thinking about tertiary education and its development are still configured in large part for a world of lifelong corporate employment, analogue processes, assumptions about continuing economic growth, stable social hierarchies and about the availability and stability of natural resources.

There is a powerful set of assumptions to be challenged about what is ‘core’ activity in tertiary education (teaching and, in some institutions, research) and what is ‘marginal’ (just about everything else, including stakeholder engagement, collaboration, enterprise, impact, outcomes, flexibility, agile provision, inclusion, place-making etc, that includes many of the agendas that have been pump-primed and incentivised by governments over the last three decades). Until the sector takes a more holistic view of its purpose, these ‘marginal’ activities risk remaining unsustainable.

The scale of the challenge can seem overwhelming (which is why it can tend to be assessed in part but not as a whole). In encouraging ourselves to face the challenge, we might resort to Steven Covey’s three circles: of control, of influence and of concern. We and those we are working with need to find the skills and agency to tackle the things over which we have control and influence, not in order to disregard the things about which we are concerned but powerless to act alone, but to affect them by collective emergent effort.

There is a capability, capacity and mind-set shift required from leadership through to those on the front line of education delivery, in order to fully embrace the opportunity that a new tertiary education landscape offers. This could be achieved by deep and meaningful people development, sharing of thinking and skills, influencing, cross-sector collaboration and partnership working utilising a co-coaching approach.

Appendix 1

Tertiary Sector Evolution – envisioning the future and how we get there

THE EVENT

The event was convened by Advance HE and facilitated by Advance HE representatives Alastair Work and Kim Ansell who started by prompting and collating some context setting and framing.

Provocation One

1. Reimagining a more sustainable sector in the context of flexible and agile university-enterprise collaboration. Funding implications, employability and disruptors past, present and future, insights from Ireland. Lynn Ramsay, IUA.
2. Learnings from Scotland of having a combined funding council for colleges and universities since 2005, and the prospects for creating a more truly tertiary sector. How much change has happened? What would have helped from a policy or whole system perspective? And is Scotland about to enter a new, more tertiary era? John Kemp, SFC/UHI

SANDPIT DISCUSSION

What are the drivers for change in different nations? And what can we learn from each other?

Provocation Two

What is tertiary education like as a system for someone who has experience of it from a higher education and further education perspective? Emma Wallace

SANDPIT DISCUSSION

What are the priorities for change for us across the various parts of our sector? And what we need to be aware of and what information we need to gather in order to make the change successful.

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