

Creating connections to weather the storm of marketisation

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Perspectives on 17th April 2020 available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603108.2019.1699196>

From the (un)holy trinity of REF, TEF and KEF to increasing reliance on tuition fee income, institutions have ever more incentives to compete and fewer to collaborate. Each new pressure on the sector seems to intensify the move towards more institutional navel gazing. Yet creating connections can drive progress in a way individuals alone cannot achieve. Even more interesting is when new perspectives and insights into enduring issues can help experienced higher education staff to view things in a different way.

Opening up the sector to innovative new providers was a key concern of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). This ‘liberalisation’ had the potential to foster new connections and bring new ideas to the sector, but the necessary accompanying regulation does not one encourage collaborative working practices that have been long acknowledged as valuable for the sector (e.g. Cross, Borgatti, and Parker 2002). In this piece I reflect on the current challenges the sector faces in creating and sustaining connections in an increasingly marketised environment.

The times they are a changin’

Increasing marketisation of higher education (HE) is well documented and has been a thread within contributions to *Perspectives* for over a decade (Brown 2007). Since the removal of student number caps, the force of the market has been more prominent (McCaig and Lightfoot 2019). Whether we are in a truly marketised environment is still under debate (Bowl 2018). Despite this, it is evident that market principles underpin everyday decision

making. Few committees are likely to make any strategic decisions these days without the impact on National Student Survey (NSS) scores being at the forefront of their minds.

The prevalence of league tables, rankings and increasing consumerisation of students through the fees levied has heightened this sense of marketisation. Whilst fee caps may have limited the price differential for home / EU students, international fees and uncapped student numbers have created an ever more competitive system. Furthermore, the regulatory changes within the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) have led to a significant and rapid increase in the number of registered providers of HE. Previously 317 providers received HEFCE funding in 2018 (HEFCE 2018). As of November 2019, 388 had registered with the Office for Students with the process still ongoing (Office for students 2019). This increase, combined with new regulatory requirements such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and more rigorous Access and Participation requirements, holds the potential for many new and exciting connections to form as more diverse providers seek to develop their expertise in these areas. However, whether this is an achievable outcome in a competitive market is questionable.

The addition of new providers prompts trepidation, and an increased fear of competition, causing some well-established institutions to retreat inside themselves. Some colleagues see competitive advantage in protecting good practice and fear that sharing this would impact on market position. I have seen this argument advanced during my time working in Widening Participation, often when established universities were considering collaboration with 'for profit' providers. Building connections with new providers is often rejected on the grounds of commercial sensitivity. Although legislation and policy have created opportunities for new connections, competition can restrict their uptake.

I suggest that if collaboration is to have a more positive impact on the sector, we must all embrace the opportunities to build connections. We need to focus less on the dangers of collaboration and more on the benefits. This is vital if we are to maintain a vibrant sector and not allow dangerous fractures to develop that marketisation has created.

The metaphor of a storm that shaped this piece is rooted in my own optimism. Storms do not last forever. With favourable winds the sector may be ready for change, and the skies may clear, allowing for a more collegial and optimistic future. That said, we cannot simply wait for the storm to pass. If we do, the damage may be irreparable. Instead we need to think about how to make the best of the conditions we find ourselves in.

Valuing connections

Creating connections in higher education is fundamental for most individuals working in the sector. The continued success of organisations such as the AUA is evidence of this desire to build and maintain these connections. These interpersonal connections can provide both personal and professional support that allow us to develop our own practices and work in the most effective ways possible. These interpersonal connections can take many forms, both within the same institution and across institutional boundaries. How then, in an increasingly bureaucratic and marketed sector can we safeguard the time and space to maintain our own interpersonal life support systems? We must acknowledge and advocate for the value positive connections can add to our professional lives and ensure that cross-sectoral connections are not made extinct by the neoliberal beast. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) sets out seven general duties for the Office for Students. One of these juxtaposes the ideas of competition and collaboration:

[...] to encourage competition between English higher education providers in connection with the provision of higher education where that competition is in the interests of students and employers, while also having regard to the benefits for students and employers resulting from collaboration between such providers (p.2)

‘Encouraging’ and ‘having regard’ are different levels of consideration and it is clear which one of these takes priority. Here, the act frames competition as king. This has the potential to create a perfect storm allowing regulatory pressure to sever the ties that bind us. In doing so this could throw the sector into a maelstrom where the focus is purely on working against other providers as opposed to with them. However, it does not have to be this way. Just because the regulator is empowered to encourage competition, does not mean we cannot resist this within our own practices. To resist the pressures of competition requires us to place value on collaboration and to build the connections.

There are many existing ways to do this such as engaging with sector wide organisations, conferences and more informal working groups. In fact many colleagues do this well and with vigour. Yet often in times of financial challenge, funds for attending external events are the first to dry up. This means who is able to take part in these connections changes. Large teams in research intensive universities for example often have more extensive budgets and capacity to engage in cross sectoral networks. In smaller teams in post-92 or specialist providers, these budgets may be more restrictive (AUTHOR 2019).

Collaboration between different types of institution can be more limited in scope. Ensuring these are protected often requires a business case but I question the extent to which many of our institutions truly understand the value of maintaining these connections to their success.

This is not an argument grounded in a narrative of short term ‘return of investment’ but one which is based on access to knowledge and experience which can inform strategic decision making. Arguing that budgets and institutional buy-in alone is the problem does not reveal the full picture. Whilst organisations can create the spaces for collaboration, it is up to everyone to embrace these opportunities. This is about more than continued existence of networks but is also about feeding and sustaining them.

Sustaining networks against the growing time and financial pressures is a challenge but arguably we have never been in a better place to do this than now. There are a multitude of digital tools and social platforms upon which to build and strengthen networks. Twitter, for example but also more private spaces such as JISCmail lists where communities of practice can be formed and sustained. There are certain parts of the university where this is easier than others and arguably competition becomes a thornier issue the closer you get to recruitment of students.

Why it is our interests to work together

Whilst it is understandable that in an increasingly marketised sector that institutions might be more protective of what they frame as their target markets, this is in many ways counter intuitive. Making students aware of their options is important but actually to think that students are not going to consider competitor institutions is an erroneous assumption.

Drawing on my own research into widening participation, my research participants, the practitioners on the coal face often talked of connections in schools often being treated like ‘state secrets’ (AUTHOR, 2019 p.119). It should not be this way. Competition should not be about fighting over the same group but carving out distinctive spaces in the market and

helping individuals make the most of this diversity of provision. By helping potential students find the most suitable place for them, institutions are likely to see stronger retention and better student experiences. However, in order to do this, colleagues working in recruitment and outreach need to understand the wider offer and where other institutions might be a better fit for a potential student. Without connections, however, it is impossible to know what else is on offer. Maybe one solution to this is revisit how we collaborate.

As highlighted previously, a diversity of perspectives can lead to more exciting connections and ideas. Consequently, in an increasingly marketised sector we need to think about how to build these connections around sector-wide issues. Creating networks less focused on job roles and what people do but instead focused on the issues that are most pressing in the sector to develop those connections to catalyse real change. How many networks become talking shops, rehashing the same conversations? Imagine if that time and energy could be put into trying to collectively address some of the big challenges that face our sector such as actually closing attainment gaps or making the further, faster progress on access and success that we would all want to see.

There are, of course, many existing networks and cross sector organisations that continue to thrive, both through routine and necessity. However, not all institutions place the same value on supporting these networks and in the case of some smaller providers, there is not the capacity to do so. We need to acknowledge that despite there being an intrinsic value, collaboration is often not what is valued in metrics. We work in a sector where the focus is often on valuing that which can be measured, and these metrics are individualised.

Individualised to institutions in terms of progress towards access, success and progression measured in terms of bums on seats. *Individualised* in terms of how well students on each

course rate their experiences on the National Student Survey (NSS). *Individualised* in terms of league table position. What also underpins this individualised competition is that there has to be winners and losers. What this can lead to is that the real losers are us, the staff who believe in the power of education to transform lives. We are the true losers because whilst institutions keep us busy chasing these institutional goals, collectively we have less time and energy to sustain the connections that give the sector true power. Many of the problems we claim to be trying to address within HE such as those relating to social justice cannot be solved in silos and require a collective effort.

The role of the individual in feeding these connections

Without individuals leading this change, institutions are unlikely to change and therefore it is our duty as individuals to advocate for and to support these networks. Creating connections alone is not enough. Those connections need to be cultivated and nourished. We also need to reflect on how we are engaging with these connections. Are we revisiting the same issues or focused on creating change? Furthermore, the value of connections comes through diversity and I think we need to challenge more often the question of who is in the room, whose voice is being heard and how to we widen out the conversation to build allegiances across boundaries of all forms; across the academic-administrative divide, across HE providers of all types to help us create those sparks of innovation that can invigorate the sector. Let us also consider more how to build each other up, celebrate success collectively as opposed to breaking each other down.

Connections can also be more productive when we focus on what matters as opposed to what can be measured. Regulation dictates that we need to keep measuring things, but sanity says we should continually challenge and question if those are really the things that matter.

Sometimes challenging institutions as an individual is impossible but collectively, we have the power to really invoke change.

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