



TERTIARY EDUCATION FUTURES

ROUNDTABLE 2: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TERTIARY STAFF

Date & Time: Thursday 17 June 2021, 12:30 to 14:00

Co-Chairs: Professor Anne Anderson FRSE & Dr Alice König (Young Academy of Scotland)

The purpose, role, and value of tertiary education

- People spoke **about tertiary education as a public good**, both in terms of allowing individuals to develop professionally and personally but also in shaping society towards a positive future. Much of this experiential development of people is not easily measured and, as such, can be overlooked. Tertiary education was seen as an important means of facilitating social mobility and addressing marginalisation. It also contributes to community resilience and sustainability.
- There was reference to **the need for TE to balance many different demands**. While TE has a role in generating and sharing new knowledge, it also needs to support learners from the very earliest ages, while also providing for lifelong learning, including that which extends beyond working age. In essence, it needs to support fundamental participation in learning (i.e. self-development) while also providing for advanced learning and knowledge creation.
- It is important that we **value and respect the choices that learners make that meet their needs and aspirations**. This requires us to consider the TE landscape in the round, and avoid placing sectors or institutions in a hierarchy.
- Tertiary education provides upskilling and reskilling opportunities to meet both current and future needs. However, there is a question as to how individuals can secure funding to enable them to realise these opportunities. The notion of **a lifelong learning funding model** which does not distinguish between sectors or institutions was proposed, and would align with the earlier comment on the importance of valuing and respecting learners' diverse needs.
- Tertiary education should also help people **"shapeshift"** between different types of roles, rather than directing entrants to either exclusively academic or technical roles (to give two examples). This is particularly important in the context of widening access, where individuals can feel certain pathways are not for them and perceive barriers to their progression. There was a sense that these types of alternative or hybrid pathways were perhaps better promoted or implemented in the past and that effort should be made to reinvigorate these types of programmes.
- There was a comment that in some ways, tertiary education might be suffering from an **"identify crisis"** in that its role is being increasingly multi-faceted: to conduct research; to teach; to function as a bureaucracy; to promote good citizenship; to engage in knowledge

exchange; and to fulfil a pastoral role to students. Furthermore, single members of staff are often expected to fulfil all of these roles simultaneously.¹

Examples and drivers of sectoral change

- The group agreed that **tertiary education will continue to become more flexible, fluid, and dynamic, helping to facilitate lifelong learning and reskilling/upskilling** – potentially across a range of institutions - rather than occurring as a single, discrete stage in an individual’s life. Participants predicted a **trend away from exclusively degree programmes towards more varied pathways** including an increasingly greater emphasis on modular, skills-based, and transferable learning. These changes were partially seen as a reflection of the **changing demographic of the student body**, with more adult learners and individuals hailing from specific or challenging backgrounds (e.g. single-parent households; older adults who have lost their jobs; etc.) which tertiary education will need to accommodate through a wider range of delivery patterns (e.g. more evening or weekend offerings). The pandemic was also understandably identified as a driving force behind this change.
- **Student expectations** were seen as another key driver of change and sectoral decision-making. Institutions effectively “compete” for students and in return, **learners may feel like consumers who deserve a certain outcome** based on the financial investment they have made in a particular school. This transactional relationship can manifest as students expecting certain grades or outcomes which institutions then feel pressured to provide to keep students satisfied, maintain their reputation, and continue to attract applicants. This can have implications for the integrity of qualifications; on a more fundamental level, it has produced a **more risk-averse academic environment** in which learners are sometimes steered away from more creative, flexible experiences towards those pathways which will lead to guaranteed positive results.
- Similarly, there was a belief that **universities have in some ways become “high school on steroids” in that learning pathways are becoming overly prescriptive** and incorporating greater elements of specific vocational training. This has come at the expense of encouraging students to try new things and explore different areas of study, not all of which will be directly relevant to the student’s final career destination but which nonetheless help to engender creativity, flexibility, and self-discovery.
- Funding remains a key and inescapable influence. However, there was broad agreement that the **business model followed by many tertiary institutions (in which funding is heavily predicated on student recruitment) is financially unsustainable** and in need of reform; the COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored this.
- Some participants expressed **frustration with how success is evaluated**. While some mentioned their institutions are trying to implement more self-evaluation practices in line with what Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and others are promoting, key performance indicators (KPIs) remain the dominant evaluation tool and tend to dictate the direction of strategic decision making and can stall transformative change.
- It was observed that **supporting systems and infrastructure – e.g. student records – must keep pace with other fundamental changes** occurring across the sector, such as changes in how institutions and society view and value informal education, which at present might not be captured by standard academic record-keeping approaches.
- **Digital learning** can complement face-to-face learning and may be particularly useful in making a range of learning opportunities more visible, accessible, inclusive, and flexible for people over their entire life course so long as the infrastructure and support is available to all to address education inequality and the digital divide. The Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal has developed Data Education for Work activities to support

¹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/recognition-academias-invisible-labour-long-overdue>

people across the region to prepare and equip themselves with the digital literacy skills to take advantage of jobs that will be shaped by data-driven innovation. Notwithstanding the **rapid adoption of online learning** across the tertiary education system, the value of face-to-face and on-campus learning was recognised, whether that relates to the tactile, in-person approach required to teach digital literacy; to developing person-to-person relationships and networks; to providing students with the full tertiary education experience; or to meeting the needs of practical, vocational and clinically-based subjects.

- **Blended learning** will change the relationship between institutions and learners. While blended learning may give rise to greater creativity and opportunities for learners to take more ownership of their learning, it may mean that behaviours and relationships that have been shaped by face-to-face learning and on-campus experiences have less influence in future.
- There was a view that teaching **entrepreneurialism** will become an increasingly important focus across programmes, not just within business degrees. This reflects a growing trend towards people pursuing multiple income streams and finding new ways to monetise their knowledge and skills.
- **Learners and staff alike should be granted more influence over strategic decision making.**

Staff aspirations and concerns

- There was broad agreement that staff are facing increasingly unrealistic expectations. There was a **feeling of demoralisation in cases where institutions focus on the rollout of impressive new flagship developments to draw in more students, funding, and positive press at the expense of sustaining or improving previous initiatives.** This can leave staff with less time to spend on core job aspects such as building relationships with academic colleagues and students and on their own development. As one staff member put it: “We are having to keep pace with the next new shiny thing that’s come along.” This rate of change and innovation was seen as unsustainable and a contributing factor behind high staff turnover in some departments and a growth in precarious temporary contracts to support short-term projects rather than increasing staff capacity overall.
- Some staff expressed **concerns about an aging tertiary workforce that has become increasingly disconnected from the world of industry, with implications for the relevance and quality of the curricula they are teaching.** They suggested there could be far more porosity between academia and industry to facilitate better career-long professional learning, including through the use of more flexible contracts. In some departments, the instructors may have worked in fields that are now effectively redundant and they may have relatively little familiarity with recent developments and where their sectors are currently headed. This reality could discourage those in industry from entering academia due to fears of becoming out of touch.
- An **increasingly flexible model of tertiary provision**, including providing for equality of access and meeting the needs of diverse learners, will have **implications for the work patterns of tertiary staff.**
- The **inclusion agenda is important from a staff perspective as well as for students.** As well as providing more flexible provision for learners, tertiary education needs to offer greater flexibility for staff. While there is a lot of institutional focus on supporting staff in the context of COVID-19, particularly with workload issues, it remains to be seen how this will be implemented in practice and sustained, and further actions is required to meet the diverse needs of staff.
- The rapid deployment of digital and online learning has meant that staff have had to develop their digital literacy skills ‘on the job.’ **Continuous access to training and support for staff** will be required.

- Looking to the future, **the role of staff as ‘teachers’ will become much more expansive** in response to meeting the diverse needs, interests, and aspirations of learners, and to support learners as they take more ownership of their learning, which is likely to include greater project-based learning.

What support do staff need?

- Staff need **time** to enable them to hone their teaching approaches, to plan, and to develop more creative teaching approaches.
- There is concern that assessment is driving teaching leading to an unfulfilling experience for both students and staff. A focus on credentialism can stifle creative learning. It was suggested that there is a **need for awarding bodies to consider more innovative approaches to assessment that would free-up practitioners to focus more on learning and teaching and less on assessment**. There was reference to the SQA’s NextGen development and piloting of new Higher National qualifications.² These aim to update course content, provide a focus on meta-skills as well as reducing the volume of assessment with a greater focus on project-based learning.
- While staff are consulted on proposed changes to tertiary education, there was a sense that they are **not listened to** and that they have a limited voice in shaping the future of tertiary education.
- Given the demand on practitioners’ time, staff have had limited opportunity to **develop their pedagogical skills**, particularly in the current context where there has been a rapid move to online and blended learning. To avoid practitioners and institutions ‘re-inventing’ the wheel, there should be signposting to easy access pedagogical support and resources for practitioners. Such an approach would also help create an **environment that encourages greater self-reflection**. While there are requirements for practitioner professional review and update, particularly those which are applied by GTCS to college lecturers, there was a sense that the uptake and operation in practice of professional update is variable across tertiary education.
- Preparing all staff for a rapidly changing tertiary education system is crucially important. Preparation and training for this needs to be brought in as early as possible, including with postdoctoral researchers and PhD students, so that **professional development and preparing for a changing environment is something which is prioritised from the start of their careers**.

Relationship between colleges and universities

- Many of the participants did not believe the demarcation between universities and colleges is helpful. Unfortunately, there still exists considerable **competition between institutions**, particularly as the 18-24 cohort is shrinking and long-term funding has become unpredictable. Some felt this competition also stems from a lack of understanding of what different providers have to offer and how they can collaborate. There needs to be a mutually respectful understanding between colleges and universities in terms of their specific offerings and how both academic and vocational training have value and merit. **Achieving this common understanding and buy-in will pave the way for better integration and cooperation between the university and college sectors**, which will ultimately be of benefit to both the learner and to the institution. Some even envisioned the idea of a “learning academy” or similar eventually replacing traditional conceptualisations of universities/colleges and serving as flexible, accessible learning institutions that would be open to anyone.

² <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/97984.html>

- Participants discussed a tension between the increasing internationalisation of the tertiary sector and the need to protect and retain local knowledge. For example, **rural colleges** provide a key service to local communities by offering programmes tailored to those areas' specific economic and geographic circumstances. However, their long-term viability can be at risk.