



# Education To Meet an Epistemological Crisis

RESEARCH

RACHEL HIGDON 



## ABSTRACT

We continue to witness the inability of the neoliberal marketisation of universities to meet the epistemological needs of both students and wider society. This epistemological crisis been amplified by the pandemic, leading to calls for complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity that might usefully contribute to messy, global problems. Pushing beyond formulaic compulsory education, a post-pandemic University needs to support a conscious and supported *unsettling*, which enables more meaningful transitions between university life and the work that lies beyond.

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'If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn't work. And by definition our democracy doesn't work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis', says Barack Obama to Jeffrey Goldberg at *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2020.

The neoliberal marketisation of universities is not working. It is an epistemological crisis. As Oxford scholar Collini's (2013) article *Sold Out* predicted, marketisation may damage quality, lower standards, create grade inflation and encourage an acceptance of plagiarism and cheating. It diverts resources away from teaching and learning, to activities such as marketing, enrolment and administration. The Research Excellence Framework (2014) and Teaching Excellence Framework (2016) have also brought a preoccupation with marketing, strategy and game playing, rather than an increased focus on the quality of teaching, the quality of learning and the quality of the student experience. League tables have escalated this obsession with customer satisfaction, value for money and course rankings. The plans by the Office for Students (Quinn, 2020) to 'stamp out any pockets of low quality', stated by Nicola Dandridge, the OfS chief executive, implied that degrees seen as low value, will be most likely those courses that do not invite high graduate salaries. Higher education has become smoke and mirrors. How do students choose, distinguish true from false, quality from low quality? These careful considerations have now become more salient for students and graduates. The coronavirus pandemic is reshaping the labour market place. How can universities help graduates survive the Covid jobs crisis?

First of all, universities should be honest. It is going to be tough. The world is complex and chaotic and the neat ways that education packages learning into assignments, modules and discrete degree programmes, with defined learning outcomes, perhaps does not prepare graduates for this messy, inconsistent and unpredictable world. Universities are pressured to become predictable, to create bubbles of safety and to plan for every minute in the academic calendar. As universities work to deliver student satisfaction, move up the National Student Survey (2020) rankings, and meet the diversity of students' academic and pastoral needs, we are perhaps doing students a disservice. We should instead be inviting realistic dialogue about what the world outside is like.

As the technological world advances (World Economic Forum, 2020), replacing many old jobs with automated roles, the most sort after commodity is the human brain. The incredible plasticity of the brain helps us understand complexity and make sense out of chaos. The creative mind has become an increasingly valuable graduate asset as employers seek ideas, designs and investigation that cannot be undertaken by technology. The World Economic Forum advocates the top three key graduate skills in 2020 are complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity. These attributes equip us to seek global solutions and sustainability across all sectors' messy problems.

Are universities providing a formulaic extension of compulsory education, rather than facilitating transition into a successful, independent graduate life? As Skea (2017, p. 367) argues, preparation for the world outside the university is at odds with the notion of *student satisfaction*. The 'settling down' of students, and 'making everything comfortable and homely' at university, may make students frightened of leaving the safe, university bubble. We should be encouraging students to use their brains, to expand them, to trust their brilliance, to become inquisitive, to be curious, to take risks, to experiment and to learn resilience from the inevitable acts of trial and error. Perhaps a conscious and supported 'unsettling' is more likely to enable a realistic transition from the community of the undergraduate degree to the messy world of work, particularly to the *unprecedented Covid* one.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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