

The Future of Higher Education in Britain: A Roundtable Discussion

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On 11 April 2025, the Early Career Network (ECN) hosted an online event focusing on the future of higher education in the UK. The event was chaired by Daniel Bowman, a PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Liverpool and Events Officer at the ECN. We were very fortunate to have an extremely distinguished panel for our event, for which we are extremely grateful. Our panel comprised: Professor Eric Neumayer, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Planning & Resources) and Deputy President and Vice Chancellor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Josh Freeman, Policy Manager at the higher education think tank the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), and John Cope, former director of strategy at UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) and was a Conservative Party parliamentary candidate at the 2024 General Election. We summarise below the main points of a wide-ranging discussion, which we hope will prove helpful to those who were unable to attend the event.

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The changing landscape in UK higher education

The panellists were asked what they envisaged the biggest changes to higher education in the UK would be over the next ten years. John Cope considered four trends in higher education from recent years and whether they would continue. He highlighted

- the massive expansion of higher education in the UK in recent years and the subsequent student loan deficit generated from it (with the student loan book topping £1 trillion soon), most of which will never be paid off and be covered by the taxpayer. As to whether this

expansion would continue, he stressed that this is a live debate to which no one currently has an answer, but the money has to come from somewhere to pay for growth.

- He emphasised that the chances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university have improved, but not at the most selective universities.
- Students are much more open-minded, and that the traditional three-year degree is no longer the default, with half of young people considering apprenticeships.
- Finally, he drew attention to the international aspects of higher education, specifically that the UK is part of a global system, and that while the UK contains some of the best universities in the world, other countries are now competing on quality.

Josh Freeman suggested that the sector would face a reckoning in the next two to three years, as there is not enough money to fund the exponential expansion of the sector. Without massive state investment, which he thought was unlikely, he predicted that we would see fewer students entering the sector. He reiterated John's point that there has been a transition away from the conventional student experience, all of which is spent studying, socialising, etc, where now the majority of students undertake part-time employment during term time. He also highlighted that artificial intelligence has changed the way students engage in their studies, emphasising that this trend would continue. Professor Neumayer emphasised the difficulty of predicting the next ten years. He argued that the sector is struggling and predicted that it would continue to struggle over the next few years. He predicted increasing competition among UK universities for home and foreign students, redundancies, and the closure of some departments.

Preparing students for an ever-changing job market

The panellists were asked how universities can continue to prepare students for a job market which is changing rapidly. John Cope highlighted the huge element of chance in applying for and getting jobs. He recommended that students visit companies, do placements, etc – that they see companies in the flesh before joining them. He highlighted that the best universities make sure that there are strong links between themselves and businesses. He further stressed the role of degree apprenticeships in linking universities to jobs and highlighted that many of the most prestigious and respected degrees were in fact degree apprenticeships. Giving the example of a traditional medicine degree, he highlighted how it is vocational and highly technical, as well as being academic – making it have all the features of an apprenticeship. Indeed, last year saw the launch of a new Medical Doctor Degree Apprenticeship for the first time showing how higher education is changing. He further discussed how

universities are increasingly including sandwich years, placements in industry, and greater workplace learning in their courses. Professor Neumayer, however, said that the LSE does not have degree apprenticeships on any scale. He said that they are administratively difficult and not financially viable for universities. He discussed his worries that some firms, for example, accountancy firms, increasingly think they can teach students themselves and fears that universities could be cut out completely. He predicted that there could be a rise in companies' sponsoring students to attend university on a part-time basis. Josh Freeman argued that preparing students for a changing job market matters more than it used to, as so many people have degrees and now require more than just a university qualification to get a job. He argued that degrees need to incorporate parts of employment, whilst conceding that degree apprenticeships were not viable in their current form. He highlighted that graduates would be changing jobs every two years and that, as a result, students would need a broad set of skills. He suggested that broader and multidisciplinary degrees could be a useful way to proceed. John Cope mentioned how degree grades were inflating at many institutions just as GCSE and A Level grades have inflated, and that as a result, companies often find it difficult of differentiating between applicants who all receive top marks. He highlighted that companies were increasingly interviewing students as a way of differentiating. When asked how degree grade inflation could be cooled, John Cope argued that it was a difficult area to address, with other areas of the education system being regulated to prevent grade inflation, but this kind of regulation has historically been anathema to the university sector.

University Rankings

A member of the audience asked how important university rankings are for attracting students. Professor Neumayer and John Cope agreed that for many international students, university rankings are crucial, yet Professor Neumayer emphasised that many of these rankings are biased against specialist institutions like the London School of Economics.

Financial management of UK universities

Building on earlier discussions, a member of the audience asked if the panel thought that UK universities were handling their finances well. Josh Freeman said he did not see financial mismanagement in UK universities. He pointed out that it can be difficult to see where the money goes, due to cross-subsidising and so on. He added that he does not think vice-chancellor pay is unreasonable. Professor Neumayer said he did not think that senior university managers wasted

money. In response to the audience member, he suggested that significant sums of money might be being spent on facilities, but pointed out that international students, who are being charged a great deal, understandably expect great facilities. John Cope pointed out that a lot of incentives had been created for universities to invest and grow, and that it is somewhat unfair for people to then criticise them for doing so. He did agree, however, that when a sector expands at the pace at which higher education has in the UK in the last decade, there will inevitably be inefficiencies. He also made the point that given every undergraduate course at UK universities funded by student finance costs students the same amount, this creates an odd system given the widely different costs to institutions, with lab-based courses far more expensive to deliver than humanities degrees. The result is that students studying for the latter were effectively subsidising other courses in many cases.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The panellists were asked what they thought the impact of AI would be on higher education and what potential benefits it might offer. Josh Freeman mentioned the results of a survey, which revealed that almost all students use AI in some respect. He argued that universities have not made the scale of change to assessing work that is required. He pointed out that AI could help reduce the heavy burden of administrative work that UK academics face, but cautioned that it takes time for universities to change.

Career advice

A member of the audience asked the panellists what advice they would give to prospective academics. Professor Neumayer accepted that it was unfortunately, a bleak picture, with many Russell Group universities having frozen recruitment and promotions (though he pointed out that the LSE has not). On a brighter note, he reassured the audience that the higher education sector would not go out of business. And that the best advice he could give was to keep going – to polish one's CV, to get teaching experience, to publish (both singly and with others), to look for postdocs, and to look for opportunities outside of academia. He stressed that working in higher education was a wonderful job and that he loved the freedom, the autonomy that comes with it. Josh Freeman highlighted that higher education in the UK has gone through periods of boom and bust and that things will get better at some point. He underscored that there was more and more movement between academia and the wider world, possibly as a result of current difficulties, and that this would create great benefits to society.

Entering university

The final question asked panellists what advice they would give to students entering university. John Cope advised students to make the most of it; that university is an amazing time where you have space and time to think and to explore. Josh Freeman counselled entrants to get involved in student societies and to take opportunities, describing how his involvement with a student society led him to gain his role at HEPI.

Conclusion

UK higher education faces a changing landscape that poses opportunities and risks to the sector. The observations of our expert panel identified several determinants driving many of the challenges faced by institutions, including the expansion in student numbers, financial restraints, and increased global competition. The panel provided a range of observations on and solutions to these issues, emphasising the need to reorganise the delivery of courses, enhance student experience, and adapt to technological developments. While concerns were raised, the panel struck an optimistic note, highlighting that while universities face many challenges, these are not insurmountable.