

Jun
5
2013

Book Review: The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education

the latest social science books reviewed by academics and experts

Blog Admin

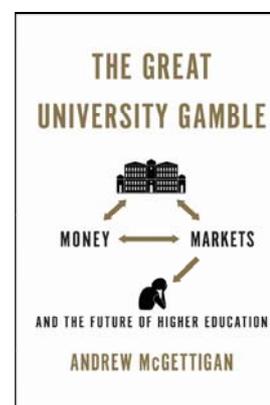


*In **The Great University Gamble**, Andrew McGettigan surveys the emerging brave new world of higher education, asking what the role of universities within society might become, how they might be funded, and what kind of experiences will be on offer for students. Written in a clear and accessible style, this book outlines the architecture of the new policy regime and tracks the developments on the ground. Even the most sceptical reader must see in this dossier that the government has a case to answer that these reforms are not in the public interest, writes **Paul Benneworth**.*

The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education. Andrew McGettigan. Pluto Press. April 2013.

Find this book:  

The English higher education system has undergone a tremendous transformation since the twin legislation of the 1988 Education Reform Act and 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. These laws removed at a stroke and with little discussion both the university-polytechnic distinction and the practice of academic tenure. Adding to that the increasingly managerialist regime imposed via the various incarnations of the Research Assessment Exercise and teaching quality assessment, it is fair to say that the UK's higher education landscape is now unrecognisable from three decades ago. The landscape continues to change so quickly that it is hard to fathom out the likely impacts of Whitehall's latest hasty decision to transform university teaching funding. Although block funding and student grants were replaced with some co-financing in the late 1990s, the decision to charge £9,000 fees for all English courses is a radical step towards privatisation in a system that until recently remained primarily public. What [Andrew McGettigan](#) seeks to do in *The Great University Gamble* is to make sense of this mess, and provide a framework for others to understand the ramifications of this latest change.



The book follows a very clear logic: it firstly explains state funding for British universities, and then characterises and dissects various kinds of challenges to public funding. This makes explicit the potential that these changes have to radically alter the very fabric of the institution with which we are all so familiar. The volume is the product of a wider scholarly discussion over the urgent threats these changes pose, both directly to universities and also to the nature of the public realm, and indeed to contemporary society. McGettigan seeks to introduce these arguments to a much wider audience and at the same time to arouse this audience to take action against the policy changes. A reader should prepare themselves for a polemic interwoven throughout the text, a polemic that seeks to convince at least as much as to enlighten.

The first section contextualises university funding, opening up the sleek bonnet of the university, showing how public funding has historically provided the engine underneath. The section provides a neat history of the 'modern' age of funding characterised by mass expansion, beginning with the 1988 Act, which set the scene for the introduction of 'cost-sharing' (tuition fees). Richly illustrated with charts and tables, this section weaves a convincing narrative of the rush of both policy-makers and university administrators to the 'free' additional resources provided by student loans. Yet, when financial times hardened, tuition fees provided a

convenient cover to unilaterally slash direct public contributions. And this has opened a Pandora's Box allowing private interests to penetrate into the heart of English universities.

The following three sections trace how private interests have insinuated themselves as the rationale for higher education. The second section deals with the idea of a 'market' in higher education. McGettigan paints a picture of a faceless central bureaucracy tinkering endlessly to try to create market-like incentives, mechanisms, behaviours and efficiencies in a system palpably unsuited for the task. The prime example of this – he explains at length – is the example of how 'student numbers' are set (places allocated to universities). The section raises the perfect question of how there can be talk of a market when the government strictly regulates the number of undergraduates universities may admit.

McGettigan's argument is that this market talk drives a wider discourse of university privatisation, and in the third section, he explains what this means for the UK HE context where universities are already 'private' organisations, albeit previously heavily dependent on state funding. This sets up arguably the most compelling section, where he rails against outsourcing, joint ventures and various private partnership practices which came to characterise modern university managerial practice. His point is that the market discourse has imperceptibly shifted university managers' responsibilities to their traditional communities (students, staff and society), to ensuring nothing more than the university's creditworthiness.

The fourth section traces the implications of these new funding arrangements, hoisting the government on the petard of its own shaky logic. The author demonstrates the simplistic and naïve assumptions that must be made to be able to claim that the new system will save money. He points out that the sheer size of the loan book will mean that it acquires a logic of its own, and as with Housing Associations and Hospital PFI deals, managing finances will take priority over providing high quality services. McGettigan concludes that the point of the shift is to irreversibly change higher education's accountability and rationale, a change, it is clear, with which the author does not agree.

The author provides a passionate and persuasive account of what may prove to be a turning point in the way the UK government regards its universities, from institutions supposed to make society better towards institutions supposed to make their shareholders richer. Perhaps in this regard the author sometimes wears his heart a little too clearly on his sleeve. It is left to the reader to draw the various rhetorical flourishes which pepper the volume together into a rousing call to arms, and the conclusion is sadly too brief to make a compelling case for what need be done. And this partisan nature raises a half-fear the author has prioritised his argument over representativeness in choosing and using evidence.

But ultimately, McGettigan has done a masterful job in delving into today's divergent and confusing situation, providing a conceptual framework for making sense of the mess. Even the most sceptical reader must see in this dossier that the government has a case to answer that these reforms are not in the public interest. And it is incumbent on the wider academic community to now take this case back to the government and seek to preserve universities' wider service, to not only financial interests, but to students, society and democracy.

Paul Benneworth is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the [University of Twente](#), Enschede, the Netherlands. Paul's research concerns the relationships between higher education, research and society, and he is currently Project Leader for the HERAVALUE research consortium (Understanding the Value of Arts & Humanities Research), part of the ERANET funded programme "Humanities in the European Research Area". Paul is a Fellow of the Regional Studies Association. [Read more reviews by Paul.](#)



Related posts: