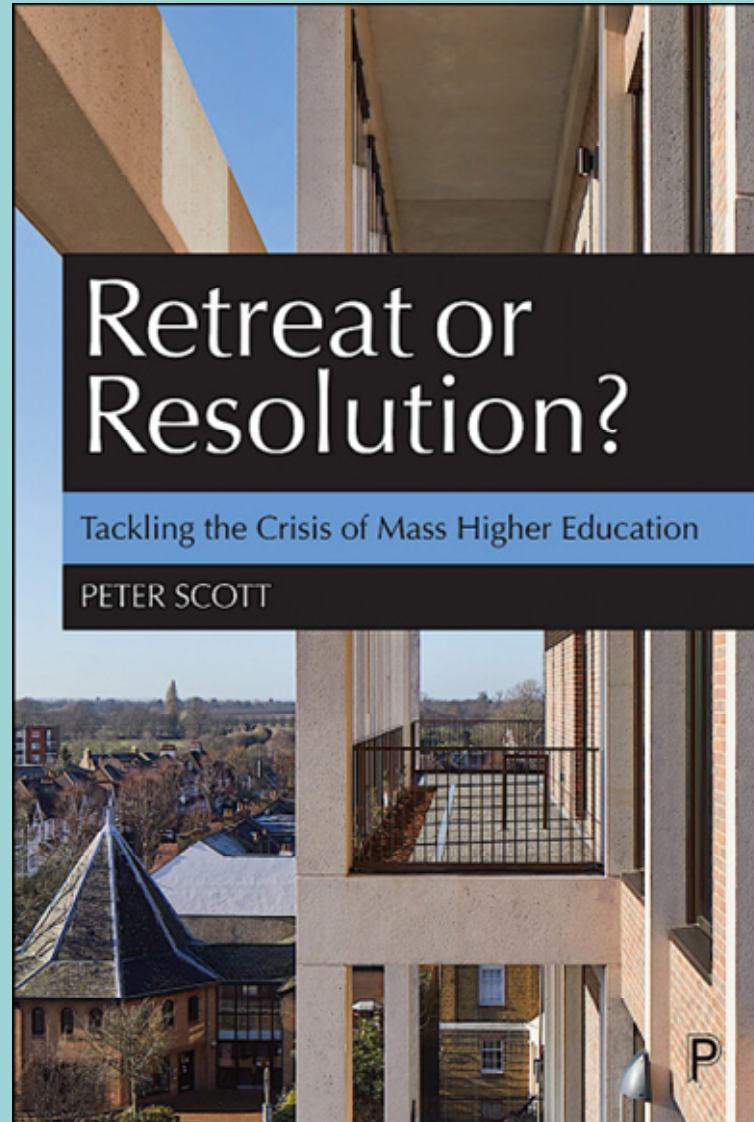# Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the crisis of mass higher education

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Retreat or Resolution?

Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education

PETER SCOTT

My approach in the book

- Academic (with dashes of journalism) - but also programmatic (agenda for reform)

- Historical - aims to combat ephemeral policy memory & also expose underlying (tacit?) values

- Contextual - HE in political economy / society (UK as typical modern society - secular, consumerist, brand obsessed, individualised…)

- *Longue durée* not *histoire événementielle*

Plan of presentation

- Three layers of critique
  - Universities on the back foot?
  - Enemies, sceptics, pragmatists & idealists
  - Does mass HE face a 'crisis'?
- The social context: postwar to post-millennium
- Themes of development
- Agenda for (radical) change

Universities on the back foot?

- A middle class game?
- 'Woke' culture / political correctness…
- Graduate under/unemployment
- Dodgy standards / silly subjects…
- Poor value-for-money - for students & taxpayers (high debt + high public spending = lose lose)
- Stuffy, out-of-touch & unaccountable
- Rise of (over-paid?) managerial class
- **BUT** inexorable social demand

Enemies, sceptics, pragmatists, idealists

- Mass HE a 'novelty' - too soon to judge
- 'More means worse' revived / preserving the real university
- Minimalist massification (differentiation as hierarchy)
- The 'wrong kind' of mass HE (a radical revolution betrayed…)

A 'crisis' of mass HE?

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

○ A revolution deferred - or denied? Access and stratification

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

○ Elites and the 'left behind'; polarisation, populism & culture wars

ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

○ Criticality, creativity v relevance / impact; 'clever cities' and brain drain ('cold spots')

SCIENTIFIC / INTELLECTUAL DIMENSIONS

○ Science - and its enemies; elite and insurgent academic cultures

One of multiple 'crises'?

- Political legitimacy (right-wing populism / authoritarian regimes… but also 24/7 'optics')
- Backlash against 'blob' - extreme proliferation of 'expertise' on social media
- Increasing inequality (in rich countries but also between rich & poor countries)
- Social cohesion / solidarity (individualism, 'speculative' culture - not just in finance)
- Cumulative environmental shocks

Post-war to post-millennium

- Growth of multi-cultural societies - & gender revolution
- De-industrialisation, services, globalisation…
- Decline of class identifiers & rise of new social movements
- Social solidarity to market individualism
- Centralisation of power & erosion of balancing institutions (TUs, local government, universities?)
- Death of 'public administration' / rise of public (& privatised) management
- Politics as 'performance' (= theatre)
- 'Speculative society' (finance, arts, individuals…)

Mass HE - themes of development

- Emergence of mass 'systems' / struggles of coordination
- Convergence of institutional forms (isomorphism)
- Expanding core: heterogeneity of institutional missions
- Eroding autonomy / accelerating accountability (State, market, governance)
- Invasion of academic 'privacy' / rankings, PIs…
- Rise of the new management class
- Erosion of normative coherence / (re)fracturing of disciplines

Agenda for (radical?) reform

1. Expansion: mass >> universal >> tertiary
2. Fair access & social inclusion
3. Democratic governance
4. New 'stories': place of HE in modern society

A tertiary education system

- 50% to 70 / 80% participation (no longer 'middle class' game)

- Contradictions of universal (for everyone) higher education (for the 'qualified')

- Lifelong learning, learning society, 'learner journey'…

- Articulated and interconnected, open pathways

- HE core + FE, WBL, community learning…

Fair access / social inclusion

- No tuition fees / HE as public good
- Targeted support (financial, academic, social)
- Enforceable targets, maybe quotas
- Moving away from 'deficit' models
- Transforming institutions

Reforming governance

- Steering 'public' systems <u>or</u> regulating 'markets'?
- Enhancing accountability (regions, cities, communities)
- …but reducing power of over-politicised over-centralised State
- Opening up institutional governance (elected members, open meetings…)
- New regimes of management control (values driven not data / PI driven)

New 'stories'

- Abandon grand 'theories of everything' / 'essential' character of university (too complex?)

- Recover / reinterpret the 'civic' to challenge State / market power

- Balance the instrumentalist narrative (value-for-money, employability, vaccines..)

- HE and democracy / its role in open societies