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# **Sagas of contemporary higher education: foreground and hinterland**

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# Sagas of contemporary higher education: foreground and hinterland

(2022 Burton R Clark lecture on higher education transcript<sup>1</sup>)

Peter Scott

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## Abstract

This lecture is based on Burton Clark's concept of 'organisational saga' in higher education. From that base it builds a wider concept of 'saga' to explain the evolution of systems rather than simply the development of institutions. It distinguishes between the structural and organisational characteristics of sagas – which I call the 'foreground' – and their affective and ideological components – in my word, the 'hinterland'.

The dominant saga of most contemporary system emphasises the tight relationship between the university and political economy. Hence the emphasis on skills, employability and impact as well as social engagement and widening participation – 'clever' universities to produce 'clever countries', in the ambition of a former Australian Prime Minister. This is the consistent foreground of contemporary higher education's saga. But the hinterland has shifted from social reformism, the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a transcript of the 2022 Burton R Clark lecture on higher education that Peter Scott planned to give at the seventh annual conference of the Centre for Global Higher Education, held online on 24-25 May 2022.

environment in which the project of mass higher education was first conceived, to neoliberal ideas about the centrality of markets and modernisation (corporatisation?), the environment in which many mass systems subsequently developed.

This saga, both consistent foreground and shifting hinterland, not only frames our understanding of higher education but drives national policies and institutional strategies (and shapes the lives and ambitions of many teachers and researchers). In this lecture I ask a simple but fundamental question – are we fated to continue to think and operate within the framework of this dominant saga, or is it possible to conceive of an alternative saga? Is it possible to imagine a looser connection between higher education and political economy (welfare state or market state) and a new engagement with democracy and human rights? The global neoliberal order has received repeated shocks since the 2008 banking crisis – the experience of global pandemic; the revived agency of the (nation) State, whether in public health or waging war; the emergence of populist movements of the right and social movements of the left. In hope as much as prediction I tentatively suggest some of the possible components of such an alternative saga – putting the ‘education’ back in higher education and developing plural accounts of accountability and engagement.

**Keywords:** Organisational sagas, welfare state, social reform, neoliberalism, mass higher education, markets

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## Introduction

Burton Clark, who died 13 years ago and to whose memory this annual lecture is dedicated, was one of a handful of sociologists who back in the 1960s and 1970s chose to focus on the study of higher education. Others were Talcott Parsons (sort of!), Neil Smelser (in passing), Sheldon Rothblatt, Chelly Halsey here in the UK, and of course Martin Trow (Parsons 1973, Smelser 1974 and 2020, Rothblatt 1976, Rothblatt and Wittrock 1993), Halsey and Trow 1971, Halsey 1992, Trow 2010).

Until then higher education had been a rare choice for a subject of study among sociologists. But the expansion of higher education in the United States, from the slow-burn start with the GI Bill after World War Two, had accelerated through the 1950s and now in the 1960s was acquiring the status of a new, and fascinating, social phenomenon, and as a result was establishing itself as a suitable subject to study. The student radicalism of the later 1960s and 1970s, however uncomfortable for some academics (including some in this group), added to the sense that mass higher education was a social phenomenon of fundamental importance.

So, a small band of pioneers, to whom should be added a small group of university leaders (notably Clark Kerr, the President of the University of California), shaped our understanding of higher education not just in the US but across the world for at least two generations. Indeed, it can be argued that with their headline conceptualisations - Trow's elite-mass-universal schema and Clark's triangle of coordination (state, market and academic profession) – they still shape our thinking in decisive ways (Trow, 1973, Clark 2008).

For the title of my lecture, I have adapted the title of an article Clark published in *Administrative Sciences Quarterly* in 1972, which was an extended version of a lecture he had given at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Washington DC two years before. His title was 'The Organisational Saga of Higher Education' (Clark 2008). Clark directly refers in his introduction to the Norse sagas, semi-mythical but meaningful accounts of heroic events handed down to and elaborated by succeeding generations. But he defined it, more prosaically, in terms of collective memory, or understanding, which we, as a band of believers, share. The saga in these terms not only shapes organisational forms and how they evolve,

which was Clark's particular concern. But this may not be applicable to institutions. The saga also sets the context in which higher education policy develops (and also our own higher education research agendas) and, more fundamentally still, the experiences of being an academic or manager in universities, and of course a student, and even defines what constitutes higher education in wider society.

It is this idea of the saga, or story, multi-faceted and difficult to contain but immensely powerful, that is the focus of my lecture today. Or, rather, sagas in the plural. There is one currently hegemonic (or, maybe more simply, dominant) saga, which places higher education firmly in the context of its links to political economy (with all that entails). But there are other sagas, vestigial and subterranean echoes from the past perhaps and also possible future sagas that locate higher education within a different framework – of human rights and democracy, global citizenship and sustainability and also individual self-realisation. One of the weaknesses of the current hegemonic saga is that it leaves too little room for the hopeful, even utopian, imaginaries that are integral to the idea of a saga.

The question I want to pursue in this lecture today is whether it is possible to imagine the current dominant saga losing its grip, leaving room for us to tell a different story about higher education. So, in this lecture I plan to do three things:

- First, to say something about the idea of sagas (and here I will be closely following Clark's own analysis – although not confining it to the evolution of organisations as he did but applying it on a wider plane).
- Second, to analyse what I believe to be the hegemonic saga in contemporary higher education (namely, its firm location in the context of political economy, from both collective and individual perspectives).
- Third, to consider whether there is an opening for a new, and emergent, saga – and what changes in higher education we might expect such a new saga to enable.

## Institutional and systemic sagas

The core of Clark's article was a study of three liberal arts colleges in the US – Reed, Swarthmore and Antioch. His concept of 'organisational saga' was well suited to describe what was special about these three institutions, how support for and belief in their institutional sagas was mobilised and sustained and the principal organisational instruments for achieving this support and belief – in their cases, because they were liberal arts colleges, the most important were a strong pastoral ethos and distinctive curriculum. I think we can all recognise the need for, and the power, of institutional sagas, even if they are now sometimes expressed nowadays in the most atrophied and degraded form as mere brands or, worse still, in the impoverished visual language of logos.

Of course, constructing such sagas has always been more difficult in more recently established and comprehensive institutions with multiple missions and possibly lower social prestige – which is the condition of many universities in mass systems of higher education – than for small and exclusive US liberal arts colleges. But the need to fashion an institutional saga remains. And the basic characteristics of institutional sagas - structure, organisation, belief, loyalty – can still be observed in how we see contemporary higher education institutions despite their diversity, even incoherence.

Perhaps more controversially, I also want to suggest that it is possible to think in terms of system-level sagas as well as institutional sagas. By that, I mean more than formulaic categorisations of systems into Humboldtian, Napoleonic and liberal education (or *bildung*) traditions, or broad demarcations between unified and binary systems, or a typology of university (whether demarcated by mission and function, or history and prestige).

At whatever level, institutional or systemic, sagas are made up of two core elements.

- First, they tell rational stories embodied in structures, organisations, professional careers, and the rest (and not just in the more exciting, but also more ephemeral, story-worlds of policy and strategy). These make up what I term the 'foreground'.
- Secondly, sagas also contain non-rational and non-structural, even affective, elements, which is why I used the word 'imaginaries' earlier. The solid structures

of the 'foreground' are animated by these imaginaries, which look back to the past for validation but also forward to utopian futures (and consequently exist across time). They make up – again, my term not Clark's – the 'hinterland'.

And it is often these latter elements that do more to shape beliefs and command loyalty. It is also these elements, as much as or more than organisation and structure, that provide the force for further development. In other words, although inchoate and affective, they are dynamic in their effects. Sagas have vital energy as well as gaining accretions over time.

Of course, this affect, these imaginaries, in sagas can be treated as a kind of immaterial structure – in other words, patterns of belief or normative structures. But, in my view, this view imposes too much solidity – at the expense of fluidity from which their energy arises. Alternatively, they can be seen as 'ideology' – either in a consciously political form (for example, the dreaded 'marketisation' or 'managerialism'), or less confrontationally in terms of organised strategy and priorities within institutions. Once again, I believe that to treat the affect that is a key element within sagas in this way is too reductionist – for two main reasons.

- First, I have an instinctive suspicion of boo-words and boo-concepts like 'marketisation' and 'managerialism', even if emotionally I identify with such critiques. They over-simplify and conflate structural and non-structural, including ideological, elements. For example, contemporary universities are large and complex organisations that must be professionally managed – but it does not follow they need to over-pay their vice-chancellors, create a new management class and impose corporate-style line-management hierarchies policed by performance review and clunky assessment systems.
- Second, the affective hinterland of sagas is more instinctive and internalised. Unlike the foreground, the structural elements, of sagas, it can be largely silent. It resides in shared beliefs on which loyalty, even solidarity, is built. It is more than simply ideology.



## **A hegemonic saga**

There is currently a particular saga about contemporary higher education that has become so familiar and so pervasive that it has tended to crowd out all others. It is based on conceiving of higher education almost exclusively in terms of its relationship to political economy. I have deliberately used 'political economy', a wide category embracing political, economic and social domains and even cultural change, for two reasons. First, this dominant saga contains both rational (or structural and organisational) and affective (or ideological) elements, foreground and hinterland. Second, again, I do not want my analysis to descend into a polemic by focussing too narrowly on ideology – and, in particular, one particular form of ideology. This lecture is not a rant against neoliberalism, however it is defined (Harvey 2005).

So, when I talk of contemporary higher education being seen almost exclusively in terms of its relationship to political economy, broadly defined, in this dominant saga, I have in mind its inevitable entry into the wider social space because of mass expansion over the past half century. Of course, it can be argued that universities have always been part of that space – as a reproducer of social and political elites or as key instruments in the formation of professional society from the 19th century onwards.

But mass expansion has intensified their positioning in social space, moving them from the wings to centre-stage. This is apparent in many ways:

- The increasing cost of maintaining mass systems which can no longer be treated as a peripheral, almost apolitical, sector (and, of course, the inevitable debates about how best to fund them – state funding, tuition fees, income generation, knowledge businesses and the rest).
- The key role experience of higher education now plays in fixing future lifestyles (and, as a result, establishing social and cultural trends and shaping personal identity) – the 'graduate society', if you like.

- Its equally key role as a shaper of the economy, whether through universities' role in terms of the research that is the source of often socially disruptive technologies and wider innovation or in its role as the moulder of new kinds of professional identity often rooted in business and the social sciences – the 'knowledge economy'
- Some would add a fourth way in which higher education has entered more fully into the social, as an unwitting fomenter of 'culture wars' – on one side, the new social movements based on freely chosen identities typical of large parts of the graduate class as well as the new assertiveness of previously marginalised groups, and on the other older class and community-based cultures with more stable, but seemingly threatened, identities on the other. But there is a danger of overstating the significance of higher education's contribution to the 'culture wars'. There are many more immediately potent forces at work. I am sceptical of arguments that claim that the failings of US higher education produced Donald Trump.

Except for the last of these four, the ways in which contemporary higher education has entered more fully into the social are structural rather than ideological – effect more than affect. So, in one sense the entry of higher education's more direct entry into the wider social space can be regarded as an inevitable outcome of mass expansion.

To put it very simply, just as higher education has come to occupy a much more central place in society, so society has also begun to talk back to higher education in increasingly direct ways. This obviously has big implications for the autonomy of universities – even if the rather informal collusive relationships within extended elites (political, social and academic) that existed in the past should not be confused with a principled respect for autonomy. This may be no great loss if the traditional autonomy of the university was aligned too closely with an inward-looking 'donnish dominion'? But it is a greater loss if this incorporation of the university into the wider social space, and the more direct (and much louder) talking back by society, have

meant that higher education has had to take on too great a range of social and, especially, economic purposes at the expense of its core goals, the education of students and the pursuit of knowledge through research.

It may be worth noting in passing that much the same has happened to science and knowledge (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001). The idea of the 'knowledge society' is sometimes rather complacently seen as a largely one-way process – knowledge pervading society. But it also involves society pervading knowledge, 'talking back' again.

### ***Successive hinterlands***

To recap, sagas, according to Clark, have two aspects – the structural and organisational, and the affective and ideological. I have labelled these the foreground and the hinterland. The dominant saga, the tight linkage between contemporary higher education and political economy, has remained as a constant (organisational) foreground – but been accompanied by two different (affective) hinterlands.

- The first, although superseded, has not been entirely displaced – a primary focus on social reform and the welfare state as an organising principle. Its structural form (the welfare state) is a representation of its affective hinterland (social reform)
- The second, now dominant, is the pervasive belief in the power of the 'market' as the primary organising principle of society (its structural form), legitimised by neoliberalism (its affective hinterland).

These two phases of the saga can be represented in this (over simple) diagram:

**Present Saga: Higher education and political economy**

<i>Foreground</i>	Mass higher education	Market' higher education
<i>Hinterland</i>	Welfare State, social reform	Regulatory State, Neo-liberal economy

Of course, 'foreground' and 'hinterland' have never been neatly aligned. In the US mass systems had been fully formed in the 1960s and 1970s while New Deal / Great Society reformism was still in the ascendant. Not so in Europe. In the UK, and other major European countries such as France and Germany, a first phase of mass expansion had taken place in the age of the welfare state during the third quarter of the 20th century. But a second, and more significant, phase took place from the 1990s onwards into the 21st century when the welfare state was on the defensive, if not in decline.

As a result, the alignment of mass higher education with the welfare state and social reformism, and 'market' higher education with the regulation state and the neoliberal economy may appear problematic. But two points in defence of this – broad – alignment can be made. First, mass systems retained the imprint – even memory – of social reformism, even after it was no longer dominant in the 'hinterland'. Second, and more substantively, it is misleading to think of sharp paradigm shifts between the two phases, in both 'foreground' and 'hinterland'. Mass systems have become, to some degree but far from completely, marketised, while welfare state reformism has continued into the neoliberal age. This slipperiness, and over-sliding, of categories may be one reason why 'mass', a label too associated with social reformism, has tended to be replaced by a more neutral label, 'high-participation', to describe today's greatly extended systems of higher education (Cantwell, Marginson and Smolentseva 2018).

### ***Mass higher education and welfarism***

Mass expansion made it inevitable that higher education would move centre-stage within the social space for largely structural reasons – the State has become more attentive, and intrusive for reasons of cost and policy; a new kind of graduate society and culture has developed; and universities became key players in terms of high-level skills and impactful research (although the word ‘impact’ had yet to be used in this context; a key phrase to describe research priorities – and performance – in earlier decades was ‘timeliness and promise’, which tried to bridge – fudge? – the gap between socio-economic relevance and scientific curiosity).

But the development of mass higher education can also be seen through a more ideological, or at any rate affective, lens – as part of the larger reform project that combined social utopianism (building a just society) with economic pragmatism (conjuring growth from higher skills and improved productivity and also from research-led innovation, which created the surplus to build that just society). Within this reform project several elements were fused together:

- the almost ‘Whiggish’ belief that, to succeed, political democracy had to evolve into some form of social democracy (in which the advancement of, and greater participation in, education played a key role).
- the repudiation of older economic models based on the persistence of a surplus of low-skill labour and, at best indifference to, and at worst active promotion of large disparities of income and wealth, an economic model which had failed the first half of the 20th century to fail - and failed spectacularly with the rise of political extremism between the two World Wars.
- and – let us be honest – between 1945 and 1990 a dose of defensive anti-communism, by giving the working (or ‘dangerous’) classes a greater stake in society by emphasising the protection of the welfare state alongside the material benefits of capitalism.

As mass higher education entered more fully into the social, this was the wider saga it encountered - and, of course, to which it powerfully contributed.

### ***Enter – the market***

This first saga – of social reform and the welfare state – is still very much around. The enlargement and strengthening of democracy and, even more, the emphasis on skills and research continues to be major drivers. Although anti-communism in its classic Cold War sense, may have run its course, in the banal rhetoric of ‘levelling up’ there remains an echo of the need to address the potential disaffection of the ‘left behind’ – although it is less clear here whether universities are now seen as much as part of the problem because of their enduring elitism or the solution because of their democratic, and entrepreneurial, potential.

However, over the past generation this first (affective) hinterland has been superseded by a second, although still within the overarching framework of higher education’s primary relationship to political economy. The ‘market’ label may mislead as a description of the organisational and structural aspect of higher education’s saga. Markets in the form of student and institutional choices and also the career choices of academics have always played an influential role in higher education. Neoliberalism, too, is a misleading label to describe what has happened in the wider hinterland. Neoliberalism is not easy to distinguish from old-fashioned economic liberalism resurrected. Maybe the difference is a dash of more extreme ‘libertarian’ thought.

Nevertheless, there has been a wider shift in the wider hinterland. First, that Whiggish belief in social reform has been replaced by a focus on individual advancement, largely in material terms, best served supposedly by a reversion to more purely ‘market’ arrangements. Next, the belief in that old, once discredited, economic model with its acceptance of rich and poor, winners and losers has been revived - at any rate, partially. Also defensive anti-communism has been replaced initially by a post-Cold War triumphalism and more recently by heightened levels of geopolitical instability, and anxiety, within the wider context of unrestrained free-market globalisation (and the resistances this has provoked). That is the new context

in which this second version of the saga of contemporary higher education has had to develop.

Of course, the shift can be exaggerated. For example, the focus on the market as an organising principle – ‘marketisation’ for those who hate it – has been accompanied, perhaps paradoxically, by a greater degree of political interventionism. The regulatory, or regulation, state has often been more activist and intrusive than the welfare state. In the case of higher education this interventionism has been seen as an inevitable result of the development of mass systems, which led to the repositioning of higher education in a more prominent place within the wider socio-political space. However, changes in the hinterland have also been important. Politics and markets have turned out to be anything but a zero-sum game. Rather, a new symbiosis has taken place, producing transgressive State-market spaces (in which universities often find themselves located).

### ***Social space to transactional spaces***

When the emphasis on social reform was dominant within the wider political economy, the overarching theme was the entry of higher education more fully into the social space. Now with a new emphasis on the efficiency of the market that theme has become the entry of higher education into an essentially transactional space. But some care needs to be taken before immediately reducing these transactions to market transactions. There is a wider context. It has been argued that the important trend has been the development of translational spaces mediating between politics, the market, culture and society – which have been labelled the ‘agora’ (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001).

In this space, however labelled, most relationships – between research and its uses (and users), between students and their teachers (and academic and professional knowledge), among academics and between academics and their employing universities, among universities (whether collaborative or, more probably, competitive in character), between universities and their communities, between business and the professions and universities, between the State and higher education – are now regarded as transactional. Indeed, the wider political economy

is now regarded as a transactional space, with non-market elements exiled to a shrinking periphery.

As a result, contemporary higher education is now firmly located within the knowledge economy within the wider framework of political economy. Of course, like the market and (economic) liberalism, the knowledge society / economy is hardly a new idea. It has been around for at least half a century. It first surfaced as 'post-industrial society' back in the 1970s and had an ambitious revamp at the end of the century (Bell 1973, Castells 2000). It is also a complex idea. Universities naturally think of the knowledge economy in terms of scientific knowledge and the advanced technologies. But is equally plausible to think of 'knowledge' in terms of images and brands. So, we are not necessarily in pole position in the knowledge economy.

Nevertheless, this linkage has become dominant in higher education's saga. 'Clever countries', 'clever cities', 'universities as hub, or anchor, institutions in regional economies' – the reports and book titles and policy concepts tumble out. The Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced that Australia needed to become a 'clever country' back in 1988. The US urbanist Richard Florida has written a number of books about 'clever cities' and the 'creative class' (Florida 2004). There is an even a consortium of 'clever cities' in Europe, included London, Hamburg and Milan, supported by European Commission funding.

The results are all too familiar.

- The predominant role of universities is seen as producing skilled graduates, both in terms of detailed technical and professional skills but also of what can be called a more diffuse 'entrepreneurial aura'. The word 'produce' rather than 'educate' is justified, because in this dominant saga the educative functions of the university have very much taken a back seat and are regarded as a means to other ends.
- Students are also encouraged to see their higher education almost exclusively in transactional terms – while on their courses, in terms of the provision of well-designed learning packages, and after graduation, in terms of ready access to professional jobs. Where they pay high tuition fees the transaction is explicit – rates-of-return on investment, some argue, that can be precisely calibrated.



- At the same time in their research functions universities have been progressively defined as 'knowledge factories'. Serendipitous research is mainly justified as leading to useful research that contributes to economic growth and improved social well-being not on its own terms. The emphasis has switched to more applied forms of research, with clear pathways to impact.

None of this is entirely new. Universities have always serviced professional society, whether the State (civil servants and teachers) or industry and commerce (engineers and lawyers). Mass higher education systems, moreover, incorporated institutions with historically strong vocational missions. The utilitarian origins, and goals, of much of university research have always been transparent.

But a step change has taken place. What has changed in the current market-suffused saga of higher education is not just that this focus on higher education as an instrument of economic advancement (with a little bit of social improvement on the side) has greatly intensified but that concrete and detailed systems, and practices, have been established that both embody and impose this focus.

Examples of these systems and practices are everywhere:

- Contractual relations between universities and their funders, particularly the State - in England the regulatory web cast by the Office for Students, in Scotland outcome agreements between universities and Funding Council, in many other countries different forms of contract.
- Within institutions new forms of governance and management, designed to manage these multiple contractual relationships and also re-orient universities as knowledge businesses and innovation hubs - accompanied by a new organisational style (labelled 'managerialism').
- The increasing definition of academic success in terms of reductionist metrics focused on outputs and production – and the parallel redefinition of student

learning in terms of satisfaction (experience, grades, jobs) rather than self-realisation through education.

- Rankings, whether unofficial league tables in the media or official assessment regimes, explicitly designed to excite 'market' competition, which they do very successfully; to police the delivery of pre-defined 'objectives'; and, of course, provide consumer information to secure the best possible (economic) value (Hazelkorn and Mihut 2022).

This is a list that can easily be elaborated and extended. But my purpose in this lecture is not to go into detail about trends that are achingly familiar, but rather to see how they contribute to, and reflect, the dominant saga of contemporary higher education.

In short, my argument here is:

- Mass expansion (and the larger social and economic changes that ran alongside it) broke down the walls behind which the university had previously sheltered - not just in a structural sense but also an affective one (it entered into the 'social' and society began to 'talk back' to the university);
- This opened the door to a saga which emphasised the relationship between higher education and political economy, initially expressed through the drive to social reform (quasi-incorporating the university itself within the welfare state) and now through the transactional space of the market; and
- Many of the policies and practices with which we are familiar reflect and embody that saga, and are now dominant. Even older practices based on different principles, such as peer review, are used to bolster the new order.

## **An alternative saga?**

Is there an alternative saga available? There are really two questions here – foreground and hinterland. First, is there any prospect that higher education in the future will no longer be seen, theoretically and in policy and practice, predominantly with regard to its relationship to the wider political economy? Second, is there any prospect of the current emphasis on the primacy of the market, and transactional relationships, being replaced by a new emphasis, or at the least substantially modified?

At the present both – the emphasis on political economy, and on transactional markets – appear to be unchallenged. They continue to dictate higher education policy in many countries, certainly the UK (and, in particular, England). Despite unease among academics, and many students, they also continue to shape many institutional structures, strategies, and processes. However, that unease too has been persistent. This saga has never felt complete. While it dominates policy and organisation, it has never been so successful in mobilising that other component of a saga - namely, belief and especially loyalty. The possibility of an alternative saga has always been open a crack; now that opening may be widening.

### ***Shifts in political economy***

One reason for that the wider political economy itself seems to be shifting. Some key features of neoliberalism (or old-fashioned economic liberalism) have been sharply challenged. In the aftermath of the unparalleled restrictions and the equally unparalleled increases in public expenditure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the exhaustion of the small-state / deregulation model appears to be complete. While those restrictions will be removed and that expenditure scaled back, it seems unlikely that the mistakes made following the banking crisis in 2008 – cutting back public services and pumping up asset values through ‘quantitative easing’ (central banks ‘creating’ money) – will be repeated. It seems reasonable to predict that the 2020s may be different from the 2010s. Only time will tell whether they will mark as a clear a punctuation point as the shift from welfare state to market in the 1980s.

The case for believing in significant change is strengthened by increasing resentment of the income and wealth gaps that have yawned in many countries during the 30 years of neoliberal ascendancy (Picketty 2014 and 2020). However vacuous the rhetoric may be about 'levelling up', or insincere the concern for the 'left behind', there does seem to have been a shift in public mood. No one now is saying how relaxed they are about the 'filthy rich', as a Labour Cabinet minister Peter Mandelson proudly proclaimed in 1999 to a group of Silicon Valley executives.

This shift in public mood reflects deeper social and cultural changes. Two are worth noting in particular. The first is a renewed emphasis on human rights - the outcome of a new sense of the fragility of democracy (most dramatically on display in Ukraine), and the uprising of previously marginalised and oppressed groups (examples include #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, campaigns on gender identities and a new focus on coloniality). The second big change is the growth of what can be termed 'ecological conscience', a new sense of urgency about not simply looming environmental disaster but also the oppression of nature, and other species, by a single species – ourselves – with its inevitable blowbacks.

A lecture on higher education is not the place to pursue these issues further. But there appears to be growing resistance to seeing the wider political economy as an overwhelmingly transactional market space, and a longing to define the wider political economy relations in less reductionist, and more human, terms. That chimes with the enduring unease about regarding higher education merely as a transactional space – filled with targets, metrics, deliverables, performance with much else missing. Together they open up the possibility of a new saga emerging.

### ***Putting the 'education' back into higher education***

What could be the elements of a new saga, which might allow us to escape from the conditioning of the current dominant saga? The first can be described in simple terms – putting the 'education' back into higher education. What is remarkable, with higher education defined almost predominantly in relation to political economy now seen through a transactional lens, is how recessive its core educative role has become. It has been swamped by other, non-educative, roles – principally training graduates in the skills needed to secure high-status jobs in the knowledge economy

and promoting social inclusion, although producing good citizens is still somewhere there in the picture (Marginson 2022).

These other, external and instrumental, roles only tangentially refer to the education that students receive. For example, the destination of graduates – a favourite metric often glossed as ‘success’ – is determined more by the status of the institutions they attend (even more than the courses they take) than by the knowledge and skills they acquire during their higher education. Graduate ‘success’ tells us rather little about the quality of that education. We all know already that graduates of elite universities, socially as well as academically selective, get ‘better’ jobs than graduates from other universities, with more open admissions policies – and why.

The fact that graduates are more active citizens, more engaged in society and commit fewer crimes than non-graduates reflects the higher social status, greater economic security and stronger stake in society enjoyed by the social classes from which graduates are disproportionately drawn. Again – it is far from clear that the actual education they receive contributes to their greater engagement or lawfulness (and how could we tell anyway, because for the middle classes higher education is close to being a universal experience so it would be impossible to construct a control group?).

This emphasis on externalities sits uneasily with the experiences of both teachers and students. Instead, we experience, and practise, university education differently – as primarily an educative process, which has some beneficial economic and social spin-offs (Ashwin 2020). At heart a university education is not about these spin-offs. It is about the intellectual formation and self-realisation of individual students. Imagination, growth, criticality – these are among its attributes. These attributes are achieved through multiple engagements – with teachers and other students; crucially with bodies of knowledge and professional cultures; but also with wider society and culture. All these engagements are complex, subtle, and inherently reflexive. It is hard to pre-plan and pre-package higher education in a transactional marketplace with learning outcomes guaranteed, still less high-status (and high pay) ‘graduate’ jobs.

Expressing the core of the higher education experience ('experience' – sadly a word much misshapen by current usage and now narrowly aligned with 'satisfaction') in these terms is not to assert that higher education is superior or special – the educative process in schools, even primary schools, is very similar. Nor is it to ignore the professional orientation of many university courses – but simply to argue that professional education in a higher education setting has educative dimensions that are regarded as crucial to the formation of future professionals and go beyond the development of expert technical skills. Nor is it a reactionary defence of traditional teaching styles, the perhaps archaic organisation of the academic year or a rigid taxonomy of traditional disciplines – but to assert that, beneath and beyond these things, higher education is fundamentally about education. Why does that sound controversial?

### ***Higher education and democracy***

The second element is to relate the university more strongly to democracy, at the expense of, or certainly alongside, its currently dominant association with political economy (at any rate, as embodied in the bureaucratic State and the market). In the past universities may have been reluctant to engage with democracy directly. They may even have seen such engagement as providing cover for intrusion into their autonomy as institutions and also for the imposition of those wider socio-economic goals at the expense of purely educational ones (which has just been discussed).

As a result, autonomy and accountability came to be regarded as a zero-sum game. But is this correct – or inevitable? The fear that autonomy and accountability are inherently opposed arises from the way in which, in recent decades, higher education has been yoked to a particular view of political economy. This required the subordination of universities to the bureaucratic State, first as a burgeoning welfare state within which mass higher education was positioned and later as the regulator of the higher education 'market'. Under different conditions, with a different view of political economy, the relationship between autonomy and accountability has the potential to become more reflexive.

There are three contexts within which a stronger relationship with democracy can be developed:

- First, the first is to develop this more distributed, and reflexive, forms of accountability. At present universities are held accountable to the bureaucratic State, both as funder and regulator (and supposedly authoritative interpreter of the 'public interest'); to students (but only in the contrived guise of 'customers'); to the employers of graduates; to the funders and users of research. None of these accountabilities relates strongly to democracy. But it is possible to conceive of much more distributed, and pluralist, forms of accountability – for example, to regional, civic, and local communities, local government, social movements. To incorporate these wider accountabilities has two advantages. First, it would reflect plural voices, a foundational principle of distributed democracy. Secondly, universities, within this more democratic diffusion of accountabilities, can become more active agents – hence, the inherent reflexivity.
- Second, universities could become more democratic in their governance and management (Scott 2021). Largely in response to the currently dominant saga of higher education centred on its tight linkage with a market-oriented version of political economy, many (most?) universities have developed into corporate bureaucracies - although their increasing scale and complexity of mission have also been factors. As a result, they have developed a significant democratic deficit in their internal working. Academic self-government has withered, and power has been concentrated in the hands of a new managerial class. There can be no return to an imagined) 'donnish dominion'. But, if there is a shift in the saga of higher education, this drift towards corporate culture might no longer appear so inevitable. The democratic deficit could be addressed by increasing representation of both staff and students in university governance – without compromising organisational efficiency.
- Third, universities could incorporate democratic agendas into their teaching and research - social justice, human rights and environmental rebalancing. That would be different from the non-educative, and instrumentalist, goals that have come to dominate the contemporary university. The development of more open and distributed systems of knowledge production (and, therefore, conceptions of valid

knowledge) and consequently of more highly contextualised disciplines (and also the growth of mass higher education systems with students drawn from much wider social groups), has become harder to distinguish between the educative and social roles of the university. Society will inevitably speak back to the academy. The only choice is whether that will be in the voice of the market or the voice of democracy. A more organic connection between academic and democratic values is a necessary element in an alternative saga to the currently dominant one.

These are two examples of potential contributions to a new saga of higher education – putting the education back into higher education and establishing stronger links between higher education and democracy. Both imply substantial changes in institutional, national and global perspectives on the future of universities. They are not the only possible components of a new saga. Others could include a focus on the new conditions for university-based research in more distributed knowledge production systems with multiple actors, or the role or status of university-based ‘public intellectuals’

## **A New Saga? Higher education and democracy**

<i>Foreground</i>	Post-market higher education (plural governance, ‘putting education back into HE’, new curriculum..)
<i>Hinterland</i>	Distributed politics, responsible economy, ‘ecological conscience’, human rights....

## **Conclusion**

In this lecture I have centred my analysis on Bob Clark’s idea of a higher education saga, in the process most probably misusing it and certainly extending it into territory – systems rather than simply institutions – which he did not envisage. My excuse is that I have found it a very useful concept around which to organise my thoughts about higher education, at the macro level, and in particular its location in 21st-century political economy. What appeals to me is the dual nature of sagas – the



development of organisational structures (the foreground) but also their rootedness in belief systems and, even more important, individual and collective loyalties (the hinterland). This may allow us to escape from a depressingly deterministic view of the development of higher education.

Despite the centrality of higher education and research in the contemporary political economy and despite the prestige of individual universities, universities sometimes appear to enjoy little agency of their own, in normative rather than operational terms. Their role has sometimes been compressed to that of service organisations, responsive to the agendas of others. This loss of agency can be regarded as an inevitable consequence of mass expansion – and of the wider dependence of our political economy on knowledge, whether scientific research with its spin offs into technology and innovation, or the ideas and images that shape individual identities. All this is everyone's business not just the university's business. End of story... Or is it? The concept of the saga, foreground and hinterland, may be key to understanding how higher education could recover a stronger sense of independent agency.

What follows is a simplification – but over the past three decades universities have largely adopted a saga that sees their role as expanding opportunities (now defined very much in terms of economic advancement rather than individual fulfilment); and servicing the knowledge and workforce needs of a neoliberal free-market political economy. The first was, and is, a desirable goal, although it would have been even more desirable if it had a more humanistic scope and it had been pursued with greater attention to equity of access and linked more strongly to community empowerment. The second has tended to consolidate expert and professional (and social) elites.

But the overarching saga of a model of political economy based on technocratic modernisation is now beginning to fray. Its latest neoliberal variant is challenged from inside by its own contradictions. Its most notable failure has been its congenital inability to develop a clear sense of the 'public good' – the Common Wealth, if you like – despite presiding over a massive extension of State and corporate power). But it has also been challenged from outside by the irruption of populism in flight from modernity, the rise of new social movements and other insurgent forces. It has not –

yet – been tumbled to the ground, but it has been weakened. This may create space for higher education to recover, but crucially also to re-imagine, its own saga, and in the process regain a greater sense of independent agency. In turn, that recovered and re-imagined saga could feed into a new, and more human, form of political economy. Anyway – I hope.

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