

The future of UK higher education: the changing landscape (0027)

Introduction

Many observers think that the UK higher education system will undergo significant changes in the coming years. The 2010 Browne report and the 2010 Spending Review include clear signals that will trigger policies that definitely will shake up the system, or will it? It is obvious that there are hard times ahead for the arts and humanities, and it is likely that fee increases will affect access. But ... things may be less straightforward than they seem at first sight. To take the example of the fee proposals: they may have negative consequences for access to higher education, but the plans contain elements that may affect different types of domestic students differently. In addition, we also have to view the fee proposals in a broader context: will high fees challenge domestic students to go abroad for a degree? And this brings us to potential impacts beyond the fee issue: will UK higher education evolve towards a (or an even more) marketised sector? Will the existing system's stratification continue to exist? Will private providers and professional bodies become important players in the field?

To better understand potential futures of the UK higher education system, a scenario study has been carried out. The objective was to further fuel the debate on the future of the system. The study can be seen as a 'logical' follow up to a 2010 LFHE project (Kubler and Sayers, 2010). Whereas that report provided a framework for leaders to help them plan for the future, this project actually develops a set of well-informed scenarios, using the Delphi method. Acknowledging that scenario planning has shortcomings (see e.g. Ringland, 1998), the scenarios will provide thought-provoking images of the future higher education system, stimulate discussions on the likelihood and desirability of such images and – importantly – provide learning opportunities for organisational managers and leaders (thinking outside the box) and trigger and support organisational strategising (see also Sayers, 2009 who mentions e.g. dialogue and learning, engagement, planning improvement, resolving conflicts and challenging mindsets as benefits of scenario planning). And, the scenarios may lead to further (re)thinking on appropriate higher education policies.

Research design

A Delphi study was carried out, soliciting the views and perspectives of higher education experts on developments in UK higher education and their impacts on the system. Generally, the objective of a Delphi study is to "... encourage a 'controlled' debate ... an interactive communication structure between [anonymous] experts in a field, facilitated by researchers doing the work" (De Boer and Westerheijden, 2005, 16). Experts indicate the likelihood and desirability of a certain statement on a facet of the future of UK higher education (1-5 Likert scales) and – crucially – are invited to explain their answers. The findings are analysed and summarized by the researcher(s) and presented to the experts for a second round of answers/comments. Based on the collective experts' views, the individual experts

fill out the questionnaire again. Normally, this process continues until saturation (considerable agreement on the statements) is achieved.

Our experience with future-oriented research projects (Huisman et al., 2001; Westerheijden et al., 2004; Enders et al., 2005) led us to design an e-survey organised around the following key – partly overlapping – themes: landscape, research, education and students, and funding. These themes are in line with those used in previous research and those presented by e.g. Kubler and Sayers (2010). In the 21 statements, links are made between factors affecting the landscape and potential outcomes. Examples of statements are: “In English higher education in 2025, the number of universities has decreased by 20%”, “In English higher education in 2025, fees will vary by institution, but are at least £15,000 per year” and “In English higher education in 2025, access has widened”.

The survey focused on developments in England, to avoid discussions (and potential confusion) on the differential impacts in England, Wales and Scotland. Two rounds are proposed, given the experience that this will usually yield a very rich data set, to use for developing the scenarios. Another reason to stick to two rounds, is that a Delphi study is quite time-consuming for responding experts.

Outcomes

We approached around 250 experienced administrators/managers working at senior level positions in the English higher education system and researchers on higher education (policy and management). The former category would include persons active in universities, but also those (partly) outside these organisations (HEFCE, research councils, UUK, HEA, etc. We received full responses from 40+ individuals. Currently – June 2011 – we are launching the second round of the Delphi study around, that focuses on ten of the initial statements. These ten statements were selected because they led to high levels of variance in terms of support for the statements. On the basis of the information produced by the Delphi questionnaire(s), three scenarios (English higher education in 2025) will be developed. The contents of the scenarios are largely dependent on the input from the respondents, at this stage no further details can be given on those scenarios. The paper will report on the most salient findings of the Delphi questionnaire and present the scenarios.

References

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