Chapter 14
Unpacking the Social Dimension of Universities

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Abstract Emphasis on the 'social dimension' of higher education in Europe has featured prominently in successive communiqués following the regular ministerial meetings in the Bologna process, although this high-level policy commitment to widening participation and social inclusion has not always been followed up by significant concrete actions. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the 'social dimension' continues to be seen as one of the characteristics used to distinguish European universities from universities in more marketised higher education systems, such as the United States. There has been a reluctance to unpack on detail what it means, except perhaps as an implicit assumption that free, or low, tuition is a precondition of widening the social base of universities. In a wider sense the label 'the social dimensions' also suggests a contrast to the economic contribution that universities make, in regional development and science-led innovation, although disentangling the social and economic dimensions of modern higher education systems is a difficult task. There is a number of aspects of the 'social dimension' – including the role universities play in preserving and developing cultural values (largely through the humanities), their direct interventions in the development of policy and more broadly social change (through the social sciences), their political, and moral, responsibilities to widen access to underrepresented social groups and their key place in civil society (and the open society).

Keywords Social dimension of higher education · Preserving cultural values · Social change · Access to underrepresented social groups · Civil society

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14.1 Introduction

The 'social dimension' has become something of a catch-phrase in higher education in the past two decades, most explicitly in Europe since its first appearance in the communiqué following the 2001 Prague meeting of Education Ministers to review progress on the recently established Bologna process (Eurostat, 2009). But the phrase, or label, has a number of distinct meanings.

The first, and most common, meaning is simply to denote national and institutional efforts to widen participation in higher education and to develop fair access policies. In Europe these efforts and policies are largely denominated in terms of social class – in other words young people from low-income families and deprived communities. Other under-represented groups are embraced within these efforts and policies, although not with the same emphasis. These groups include:

- The disabled, who in most jurisdictions are protected by wider anti-discrimination laws. In recent years the focus on physical disability has been expanded to include wider considerations of mental health (although here the impact has been as much on continuing success as initial access).
- Women. Although women now represent a majority of higher education students in almost every European country, they continue to be under-represented in some key disciplines and at some levels.
- Ethnic minorities. There are wide differences in participation among with these minorities and some enjoy high levels of participation in universities – for example, Britons of Asian heritage in UK medical schools. But in general they remain under-represented in aggregate and are often concentrated in lower-status institutions.
- In recent years refugees and immigrants have also become beneficiaries of widening participation and fair access.

This European focus on social class is in contrast to the focus on race in similar policies in the United States, for historical reasons that are well understood.

The second, as much implied as directly stated, meaning of the phrase implies a contrast between higher education in Europe where it is largely tuition-free, with the important exceptions of England (but not the wider United Kingdom) where students now pay high fees and also some central and eastern European countries where private institutions have flourished, with the more market oriented systems in other world regions where students are often charged substantial tuition fees. When the 'social dimension' is used in this second sense the assumption is that free (or low) tuition is a necessary precondition of successful efforts to widen participation. Used on this second sense, the 'social dimension' may also be a code that contrasts wider geopolitical differences between countries that have developed, or maintained, welfare states with high levels of social expenditure and countries that have maintained, or adopted, neoliberal economic and social policies focused on the 'liberalisation' of the market and so-called 'rolling back of the State'.

The third meaning of the 'social dimension' is to indicate the wider social responsibilities of universities. These responsibilities have many dimensions – educational and intellectual, in terms of promoting critical enquiry and open science; political and/or democratic, in terms of accountability to the public and their elected representatives; economic, in terms of the direct role played by universities in creating employment, developing new technologies and educating key professional workers and also their indirect role as centres of innovation, experimentation and creativity; cultural, in terms again of their direct contribution through the provision or art galleries and museums and sponsorship of other cultural events and also their indirect contribution as expressed in the cultural tastes and demands of publics who are increasingly graduates; as well, of course, social in terms the responsibilities that universities have for reducing, and removing, barriers to participation among those living in socially deprived communities or who are disadvantaged in others ways (for example, age, gender or disability) – on other words, the widening participation and fair access policy agenda. In addition universities have important responsibilities for promoting social inclusion as the leading institutions within wider educational systems.

There are also other dimensions of these wider responsibilities. Examples include the responsibilities universities have in terms of their impact on urban spaces, planning and transport, and even their aesthetic responsibilities in terms of their stewardship and construction of well designed buildings. Since the advent of mass higher education universities have become key elements within many city-scapes, in addition to the central place they have always occupied in smaller urban communities that developed around them. Finally, in recent years more attention has been focused on the responsibilities of universities in the context of sustainable development, often with direct references to the United Nations Sustainability Goals. Unpacked the social responsibilities of universities comprise a long list.

In this chapter all three meanings of the 'social dimension' of higher education will be discussed – first, widening participation in and fair access to universities that is the focus of so many communiqués, strategies, initiatives and research reports; secondly, the restricted code used to distinguish between public and largely tuition-free higher education systems and more marketised systems in which students are charged substantial fees; and, finally, the wider meaning of the social responsibilities of universities in the multiple contexts that have just been briefly listed. At the heart of this chapter is a question – is there a necessary connection between these these three meanings of the 'social dimension' of universities? Or, to express the same question more sharply, are public and tuition-free higher education systems more likely than market-oriented high-fee systems to discharge their social responsibilities in both the first sense of success in widening participation and promoting fair access and also the third sense of the wider social responsibilities of universities? My conclusion, which inevitably will be contested, is a tentative 'yes' to these questions.

14.2 Widening Participation and Fair Access

The drive to widen participation to higher education has undoubtedly captured the policy agenda. Every successive communiqué of the regular meetings of Ministers of Education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to review progress towards implementing the Bologna process has highlighted the social dimension, and with increasing emphasis but not necessarily more detailed and precise definition (EHEA, 2020; Dovigo, 2020). A focus on social inclusion, and the responsibilities of universities to promote it by opening their doors to under-represented social groups, can also be found in most national higher education strategy across Europe – and indeed the world.

The same emphasis can be observed at the level of individual universities which have often developed detailed programmes – to raise aspirations among individuals by reaching out to them; to make good any deficits in terms of their academic preparation by providing summer schools, 'bridging' and mentoring activities; to make adjustments to entry standards to reflect educational and wider social disadvantage (in those systems and institutions that are able to select their students); and by reducing drop-out among so-called 'access' students to supporting their efforts to succeed to the same degree as traditional students. In other words, at the policy level, there is almost no dissent from the need to widen participation and make access to university fairer. The direct responsibility of universities to promote social inclusion in their local, regional and national (and indeed international) communities is almost universally accepted.

However, this near-unanimity at the policy level has not necessarily been reflected in practical results. Overall there remains a gulf in participation rates across different social groups. In most European countries young people from the most socially advantaged quintile are between three and four times more likely to study at university than those from the most socially deprived quintile. This gulf has narrowed since the advent of mass expansion between the 1960s and 1990s – but not by much. There still remains a social divide between the profiles of students in universities and higher professional schools, where formal dual or binary systems have been maintained, and between different types of university in unified systems, between elite universities and more recently established, and more socially inclusive but lower-status, institutions. Pavel Zgaga himself emphasised that expanding higher education did not address these inequalities of access (2015). Too often perhaps it was assumed that expansion would lead to greater equity.

The reason for this gap between the unanimity and insistence of the policy focus on widening participation across different countries with different types of higher education system and the sometimes-limited progress towards that goal are various.

One reason is simply that, despite the prominence attached to the social dimension as a policy goal at the European level, only limited action has been taken at a European level, with the exception of the funding of a small number of research programmes. This is in contrast to the actions that have taken in other policy areas within the wider Bologna process such as harmonising course structures across

Europe, in effect the adoption of a two-cycle Bachelors and Masters pattern now supplemented by a third cycle, the doctoral level, and taking active steps to promote a 'quality culture'. Any substantial concrete measures to widen participation and promote social inclusion remain firmly within the competence of member states (Kooij, 2015; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). The result is a predictable pattern – in Scandinavia (and, to a more limited extent, the UK) widening participation policies are well developed; in many other countries they are less well developed; and in some they are almost entirely absent. Weedon and Riddell conclude: 'Whilst some countries monitor the impact of their widening access measures many do not, which suggests that widening access to higher education is not a high priority in many European countries' (Weedon & Riddell, 2016).

However, there are other more structural reasons for this gap between policy aspirations and performance, not just in Europe but more widely. One is the familiar critique of mass higher education. In its simplest form this critique argues that mass access has predominantly benefitted the 'middle class', broadly defined, and in effect has created a two-speed system – near-universal access for the socially advantaged and continuing restrictions on access for the more socially deprived. In this extreme form the argument is difficult to sustain. It ignores the transformation of social structures over the past half-century, a prominent feature of which has been the emergence of a much larger and more heterogeneous 'middle class', partly as a result of the extension of the higher education 'franchise' but largely as a result of occupational and cultural shifts.

In a more nuanced form, this critique of mass higher education has greater cogency. Although mass access has undoubtedly created more opportunities for more people from wider sections of society to participate in some form of higher education, it has been accompanied by greater differentiation – or, some would prefer, hierarchy – among institutions. In practice this differentiation of higher education, almost universally espoused as a desirable policy goal, has tended to sustain, and to some degree to legitimate, the stratification of the study body in terms of social class. New kinds of student from less socially advantaged backgrounds have tended to be concentrated in less prestigious sectors of the system, and institutions, leaving the student profile in elite universities relatively unchanged by mass access (even when these universities have substantially increased their student numbers).

The process of differentiation has been reinforced by another near-universal policy drive, for 'excellence'. This has been produced by the heightened sense of competition in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy, and the centrality of higher education and research in this new global competition. One result has been the emergence of a new political discourse of 'world-class', or simply the 'best', universities, typically expressed in terms of performance in global university rankings and league tables but also stimulated by the growing popularity of 'branding' in universities. This may have made it more difficult to make progress towards greater fairness in university admissions and, more broadly, social inclusion. Selectivity, seen as a measure of 'excellence', is strongly aligned with student profiles weighted towards elite social groups. Efforts to make student profiles that are more representative of the wider population, and to make progress towards wider

participation, countervailing measures which also count towards the reputation and ranking of universities have so far met with limited success. A further complication is a tension between internationalisation, in effect if not intention elite exchanges and elite staff and student flows, which is also highly rated in global rankings, and efforts to promote social inclusion within local communities.

However, the main explanation for the gap between the intense policy focus on widening participation and social inclusion and the limited results that have so far been achieved is to be found not so much in the internal dynamics of higher education systems but the wider evolution of society and the economy. Put simply, in its efforts to widen its social base higher education has been trying to walk up a downward-moving escalator. Since the 1980s – in other words, when mass higher education first became established as the dominant form of post-secondary education – the twentieth-century trend towards greater equality of incomes, and therefore greater equality of life chances, has been thrown into reverse. Income inequality in many advanced societies, especially the US and the UK, is now approaching levels last seen more than a century ago on the eve of the First World War (Picketty, 2014). The reasons for this trend, such as the destruction of capital in two world wars and subsequent upheavals and the creation of welfare states to protect liberal democracies against political extremism (notably Communism), are fascinating but beyond the scope of this chapter.

The reversal of this trend towards equality is also the result of the deliberate adoption of what are usually described as neoliberal or free-market policies – reduced rates of taxation (especially on the wealthy); within that reduction a shift from direct taxes on income and wealth, which are progressive in their distributional effects, to indirect taxes on expenditure, which are neutral or regressive; and also the reduction of social expenditure, which provide a larger share of the income of the less well off. But the argument that this so-called neoliberal, or free-market, turn has been largely responsible for the difficulties encountered by efforts to promote social inclusion needs to be qualified. It may also have encouraged an erosion of traditional class-based cultures and habits of deference, which themselves were barriers to wider participation in higher education, although for some previously under-represented groups in higher education – for example, women, ethnic minorities and the disabled – another. and unconnected, trend, towards greater social liberalism, played a larger part in removing these barriers.

14.3 Free Higher Education – Or Fees?

It is at this point that another result of the neoliberal turn, the (proportional) decline of State expenditure on higher education and the shift to tuition fees, enters the argument – and brings us back to the internal dynamics of higher education systems and their impact on the success of efforts to widen participation and promote social inclusion. Although it is rarely stated in formal documents from the European Union, other European agencies or individual European countries an emphasis on

the social dimension is often assumed to be characteristic of European higher education, in contrast to the more market-oriented systems that prevail in north America and higher education systems in east Asia within the so-called Confucian cultural zone – almost a distinctively European 'model'.

In practice, as has already been suggested, the concept of the social dimension remains imprecisely defined, even in the most basic terms of identifying which social groups should be targets of efforts to widen participation. In some European countries a number of separate groups is identified; in others – for example, France and Sweden – the focus is on potential students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds without further elaboration. Identification of cultural and ethnic minorities is also a delicate question because it impacts on definitions of nationality and citizenship, which differ across Europe for historical reasons from universalistic 'republican' definitions of citizenship to narrower definitions based on an assumed common ethnic identity and shared cultural traditions (both of which present challenges, but very different ones, for widening participation for minorities). Yet despite this imprecision the idea of the social dimension remains a potent one in Europe (Usher, 2015). A clue to this potency is the belief that what is singular about the social dimension in a European context is that it is closely associated with the maintenance of public systems of higher education funded almost exclusively by State expenditure which either charge no, or very low, fees to students.

It is not within the scope of this article to point out the many qualifications that must be made to this assumed linkage between the social dimension and free higher education as distinctively European – the importance of private fee-charging institutions in some European countries, especially central and eastern Europe; the predominance of State institutions within the US mixed public-and-private higher education system(s); the importance of public universities in some key east Asian countries. The question remains – is free or low-tuition higher education provided predominantly in State or other public institutions a precondition of successful efforts to widen participation and promote greater social inclusion in universities? Or is it better to charge students, many of whom still come from economically and socially advantaged backgrounds, fees, a proportion of which can be recycled to target potential students from more socially deprived backgrounds?

The choice represented by these questions needs to be addressed in both empirical and philosophical terms. There is a large amount of research literature, although much is perhaps over-influenced by advocacy or defence of specific policies. There are so many variables that have to be taken into account and so many historical, cultural and administrative differences that like-for-like comparisons are difficult. Within the UK a clear-cut comparison should be possible because in England students are charged the highest tuition fees in any public higher education system in Europe, arguably in the world in terms of average fees, while Scotland has maintained the European 'standard' of free higher education, at any rate for students living in Scotland. But even in this apparently straightforward comparison these other differences have made it difficult to reach firm conclusions (Scott & McKendry, 2020).

In practice high fees, even when combined with generous loans, have a high potential to act as a disincentive to potential applicants from poor homes, unless decisive corrective action is taken. But the effect of treating higher education as a 'free' public service funded out of taxation, like schools, is to provide a universal benefit regardless of income. Given the existing socio-economic profile of students, in particular in elite universities, this leads to a subsidy for the 'middle class', especially in the absence of a progressive redistributive tax regime. But this is true of many public services. Why is higher education regarded in a different light?

The fact that higher education is not (yet) seen as a core public service may suggest the comparative failure of mass expansion to deliver more equitable access. Charging fees for the 'users' of higher education, unlike schools, also emphasises that it is regarded more as an individual, and positional good, than a public, and universal (even absolute), good, an emphasis that is hardly unexpected given the popularity of anti-statist free-market neoliberal ideology in some countries. These individual or positional goods are 'valued' in terms of rates of (economic) return as measured by graduate earnings. Of course, the same utilitarian model can be applied to State investment in higher education alongside individual 'contributions', or to the goals of public policy.

This is why considering the same choice between charging fees and providing 'free' higher education in more philosophical terms is perhaps more rewarding, and also more relevant to any claim that there is a European model of higher education in which social inclusion and free higher education are closely aligned. Put simply, providing free higher education suggests commitment to a communitarian set of values while charging high fees combined with targeted support for disadvantaged applicants suggests a belief in more individualistic values. To the extent that the European Union, and the wider European project, is regarded as embodying values of cohesion and solidarity free higher education is perhaps a natural expression of this more communitarian orientation. Such an association can only be suggestive and is difficult to identify in concrete empirical terms. Nevertheless, it is a plausible explanation of the reluctance of many countries in Europe to charge fees.

The same choice also reflects different beliefs about the ultimate goals of widening participation to higher education in order to promote social inclusion. For some it is essentially an ameliorative project, to remedy deficits potential applicants to university have because of shortcomings in their school education (or in the wider social and cultural capital to which they have access) so that they can compete on more equal terms with their more privileged peers. Here the emphasis is on equality of opportunity. According to a second view of widening participation and social inclusion the emphasis switches from social mobility to social equity, and from individual deficits to deeper structural patterns of deprivation and discrimination (Boliver & Powell, 2021). In a third view widening participation is a transformative project, aimed at reordering the purposes of higher education through the creation of a much wider and more inclusive social base among students and also reasserting the role played by universities in wider social transformations (Brennan, 2018). Here the emphasis is on social justice.

14.4 The Social Responsibilities of Universities

This contrast between focusing on social mobility (incremental and evolutionary policies to remedy individual deficits), social equity (more radical policies to address deeper structural inequality) or social justice (the radical transformation of higher education itself) brings us to the third element in the social dimension, the wider social responsibilities of universities. The sheer variety of these wider social responsibilities was emphasised earlier in this chapter. In summary these responsibilities are:

- Educational and intellectual: to foster critical enquiry, in particular through the humanities and social sciences; to promote open, disinterested and curiosity-driven science and scholarship; and to contribute to the vigorous intellectual life of an open society. These responsibilities are principally discharged through teaching and research, the core functions of the university.
- Social and cultural: to promote social inclusion and embody social and cultural diversity, in student recruitment and staff employment policies and practices; and to preserve, develop and challenge cultural and aesthetic traditions, by educating new generations of artists and offering secure spaces for cultural innovation and experimentation.
- Political: to contribute to the formation of responsible citizens; to be accountable to wider society (as expressed through democratic actions); to respond to the priorities established by democratic governments (local, regional and national), in particular in the education of professional workers and through scientific and technological research; to assist in the development of policy through informed advocacy and research; and to offer a base for alternative thinking.
- Ecological: to contribute to global sustainability goals, both by operating in as environmentally friendly way as possible and by developing a wider and deeper understanding of ecological issues through teaching and research both among their students and in the wider community.

Alongside these social responsibilities, and to some degree overlapping, sits the contribution of higher education to economic development. Economic growth, and increased productivity, leading to an increase in the wealth of individuals and nations are at the heart of the programmes and priorities of most Governments – at least for the present, although that might change if or when the impact of the ecological crisis is fully recognised. Investment in research and technology, and in developing expert professional and higher technical skills, is regarded as key to growth and productivity. Trends that tend to raise doubts about the validity of this belief, such as the growth of poorly paid and insecure jobs even in advanced societies and concerns about the over-production or under-employment of graduates, tend to be brushed aside. This belief remains unchallenged, and maybe unchallengeable, in terms of high politics. Recent decades are littered with ambitious goals and innovation strategies reflecting this belief.

Two results have flowed from the predominance of such thinking. The first is a policy preference for measuring the value of higher education systems, institutions, disciplines and graduates by attempting to determine rates-of-return in relatively narrow terms, i.e. increased earnings or faster growth. Leaving to one side the validity and accuracy of such calculations, this overall approach to measuring 'value' is not only reductionist; it is also discriminatory because restricted systems will often 'score' more highly than open systems, elite universities more highly than lower-status but more accessible institutions, graduates from privileged social backgrounds more highly than those from more deprived communities or minority ethnic and cultural groups, STEM (science, technology, engineering and medicine) disciplines more highly than those in the humanities and (most of the) social sciences. The second result is that the wider social responsibilities of higher education tend to be downgraded (Holford, 2014). The economic contribution of higher education is apparently straightforward to define and, supposedly, easy to measure. The social responsibilities of the university are varied and complex, and difficult to reduce to measurable goals.

In addition to this downgrading of the social responsibilities comparative neglect of their centrality makes it difficult to suggest an interpretative framework within which the connections between the different dimensions of these responsibilities can usefully be explored. One potential framework is based on an extension of the corporate/social responsibility reporting requirements now imposed on many organisations, both State and public and also market. In some countries these statements are also required of universities. In the UK, for example, universities are treated as charities, and must satisfy the conditions imposed on all charities. These conditions typically focus on good governance to ensure that organisations stay true to their charitable objectives, which has not always been easy to reconcile with the entrepreneurial orientation of, and quasi-commercial activities undertaken by, some universities. The practice of 'corporate responsibility' also covers matters such as fair employment, and adherence to various codes of best practice in areas such as the impact on the environment. But such a framework is too limited to cover the many dimensions of the social responsibilities of universities, not least because it does not cover their core educational and intellectual responsibilities but instead focuses on their organisation and impact.

Another possible framework is to meld together the economic impact of universities, as measured both by their immediate impact on employment and economic activity and their wider impact on productivity and technology, with their wider socio-cultural impact. This approach to link equity and growth is evident in a Bologna follow-up report following the Yerevan Education Ministers' Conference (Bologna Process/EHEA, 2015). This is what the now extensive literature on 'clever cities' attempts to do, and more popular representations of proliferating 'Silicon Valleys' around the world. According to this literature, and these representations, universities at the heart of these, usually urban and in spirit 'metropolitan' even cosmopolitan', centres of creativity, innovation and enterprise. Cultural experimentation (art and theatre), social liberalism (especially in the form of new gender and plural-cultural 'identity') and economic dynamism (in the context of new – often

digital – technologies) are blended together in this almost intoxicating vision of the future, and of the key role of the university within it.

However, even setting aside the strong 'populist' pushback against this essentially elitist vision, it encounters three objections. First, it is a very old vision, stretching back to the centuries (or even millennia) old view of the city as a centre of civilisation surrounded by more primitive people – barbarians or pagans (in its original meaning). Secondly, it is not at all clear that these different strands are as tightly woven together as this account suggests. Is it – empirically – correct to treat high-tech innovation and respect for gay rights, or experimental theatre and new kind of social and family relationships, as parts of the same movement? Finally, and most relevant to the theme of this chapter, it is not clear how widening participation and fair access to higher education fit in, except perhaps as a means to identify 'the best and the brightest' hidden among the poor. Conscripting what is an essence an anti-elitist project, the widening of higher education's social base as part of wider societal transformation, within an elitist vision of 'excellence' and 'innovation' does not appear to make good sense.

14.5 Conclusion

These three strands within the social dimension of higher education – widening participation and social inclusion; the distinctiveness of the European 'model'; and the wider social responsibilities of universities – are closely linked. The first is an almost unchallenged policy discourse, but implementation and progress have been unimpressive. Even within Europe efforts to make the student body more representative of wider society have achieved patchy results with only a few countries making widening participation a core priority. Clearly more effective action needs to be taken at the European level. Communiques that rhetorically reiterate the importance of the social dimension after Bologna 'summits' and a handful of research projects are not sufficient.

This is especially important if the claim is made, however tacitly, that there is a European 'model' of higher education, based on free tuition and public universities, which are prerequisites of successful efforts to promote fair access to higher education and greater social inclusion – the second strand within the 'social dimension'. There is a risk that free tuition and public universities will be seen not simply as necessary preconditions but sufficient conditions for the delivery of fairer access. Without both active programmes to promote fair access and wider national, sectoral and institutional commitment to rectifying the current bias in favour of the most advantaged social groups in admissions to higher education (and as a key priority not a mere aspiration), any European 'model' of higher education, supposedly superior to more highly stratified market systems in other parts of the world, lacks credibility.

With the third strand, the wider social responsibilities of universities, there is a similar ambiguity, even infirmity of purpose. Are these responsibilities essentially

ancillary to the core mission of modern higher education systems, which is to act as engines of technology-enhanced economic growth (and increased material wealth for individual graduates) – like corporate good works in markets focused on economic profit? Or are they woven into the same story of innovation, creativity, experimentation and enterprise, which apparently has little room for critical voices (except perhaps as 'disruptive' ideas that recycle back into narratives of – economic – 'wealth creation')? Are these social responsibilities of higher education discrete and largely disconnected, or can they be integrated into a framework of wider choices between facilitating social mobility, promoting social equity and leading more radical transformations to achieve social justice?

Once these questions may have lacked urgency. It seemed enough to promote incremental policies, as often aspirational as operational – in brief, the stuff of high-level communiques, and sometimes marginal efforts to widen access. But two new factors have erupted that make such gradualism no longer adequate. The first is the so-called 'populist' revolt against the growing inequality and austerity that have characterised the response of so many Governments over the past decade to the 2008 financial and economic crisis, often expressed through the distorting megaphone of the social media, but alongside this semi-authoritarian 'populist' revolt also resistance of other more radical and less nihilistic social movements. Fundamental principles of rationality, objective science and professional and scientific expertise – but also the insouciant entitlement of so-called 'elites' – have come under attack. Unless higher education takes urgent action to widen its social base and embrace democratic rather than elitist values (and develop more open and less hegemonic interpretations of academic knowledge?) it risks ending up on the wrong side of history. The second factor is the growing ecological crisis, of which the Covid-19 pandemic (which, of course, has also highlighted the gross inequalities of most societies) is perhaps the sharpest reminder. There can be no more important element in the 'social dimension' of universities than their perceived ability address this most existential of questions, the terms on which the human race can continue to live in balance and harmony on our planet.

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