Chapter 5
Freedom Through Education: A Promise Postponed

David Davies and James Nyland

Education, or better still learning, interests us all, especially our own and that of our children. It is surprising though how quickly interest is lost when the topic of education and its deep impact on society and culture is mentioned in polite society! Yet schooling is now ubiquitous—it is everywhere and in every parent's mind and it is the universal key to the door of opportunity. Few people can get anywhere without it and whether it is enclosed in brick, concrete and glass or downloaded from the internet platforms which have come to dominate so many lives, learning in some form is intrinsic to life that swirls on all around it. Education goes deep but it squanders the talent of many who pass through it. Equally significant is the possibility that conventional education and its curriculum is now increasingly irrelevant to the world we are educating for—the world of 2050 and beyond.

It has been said that education professors can be considered to not so much speak on or about education but are obliged to speak for education. Education is more than a subject or field of study or academic enterprise; it is the major means by which a society such as ours defines and achieves its intentions for change, tests its sense of social justice and delivers on its aspirations for a free society. Education within and through universities in the modern world stands as a proxy for the public interest in what is increasingly seen as a 'learning society', a concept that came to the fore in the 1990s. It signalled a growing conviction that learning was for everyone and that it should and could be available for all those who wanted it and needed

D. Davies (✉)
University of Derby, Derby, UK
e-mail: daviesclarke@btinternet.com

J. Nyland
Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia
e-mail: jim.nyland@acu.edu.au

J. Nyland and D. Davies (eds.), *Curriculum Challenges for Universities*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-8582-8_5

it (Fryer, 1997; Dearing, 1997; DFEE, 1998). This chapter considers the transition from a previous and highly selective type of higher education, designed for a minority of any population, to a mass system thought to be democratically more inclusive and extending participation to a vastly greater number of learners. This broadening of opportunity developed significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century and was a crucial conjuncture in modern social life (Barnett, 2000; Trow, 1974, 2006). It was the focus of academic debate and wide policy discourse as this chapter demonstrates. In the last decade of this, twenty-first century, however, there has been once again debate and discourse about the purposes of higher education, especially around the theme of engagement. In the light of the need for a rejuvenated economic and social life and in the face of the great issues and challenges of the day, the role of higher education became critical once again (Bell, 2018, 2019; Davies & Nyland, 2018; Walker & McLean, 2013; Williams, 2013).

5.1 Threads Through Time: The Challenges to Higher Education

The notion of freedom that informs this chapter is about access to opportunity and fairness. It is also about combatting manifest inequalities and the role of learning and knowledge linked to aptitude and ability in the search for a just and equitable education for the broad masses of people who need it. The role of education in modern society is the key to this concept of freedom. The growth of mass higher education has simultaneously and co-extensively been the growth of opportunity. It is this phenomenon that has provided opportunities for economic prosperity for the millions who had no family wealth or capital to invest and whose 'cultural capital' and aspirations were denied in the past. It is also about how education should enable people to find themselves and to find a place in the scheme of things. Freedom is about economics and life chances but it is also about constructing a culture of inclusion not exclusion, a perspective shared across the whole period of growth of mass higher education. Sheila Rowbotham used the term 'threads through time' to encapsulate this sense of continuity in the struggle for improved and more just social outcomes and it is a fitting description of the modern development of mass higher education (Finegold & Soskice, 1998; Finegold et al., 1992; Hockings, 2008, 2010; Porter, 1999; Rowbotham, 1999).

For most of the period after the Second World War, higher education institutions formed the pinnacle of the education and training systems in Britain, in Australia and elsewhere. They recruited highly selectively from 18-year-old school leavers (mainly white and male) and prepared them for secure and well-paid employment in influential roles in society and the economy. Through its influence on school examinations and its position at the end of the ladder of progression, higher education set standards for the rest of the education system. Through its teaching and research

functions, it defined what kinds of knowledge, skill and understanding were to be most highly valued in society (Edwards, 1998).

By the end of the twentieth century, much of this educational landscape had changed! At that point in time in the UK, for example, a large proportion of entrants to HE were 'mature' at the point of entry whilst some 42 per cent of 18-year-olds in England and Wales entered higher education and the proportion of women of all ages had increased rapidly. However, as the new century progressed it became clear that a first degree was no longer a guarantee of high-status employment. The traditional role of universities in defining and valuing knowledge was also less clear (Watson, 2014); in many fields, new knowledge was being created in commercial and industrial settings and the right of the academic world to validate knowledge came under challenge politically from external forces and philosophically from within the academy itself (Barnett, 1997; Scott, 1997; Wills, 1998).

By 2020 some 165 higher education institutions were enrolling some 2.4 million students in the United Kingdom, of which 1.8 million were undergraduates, though Scotland and Wales were by now funding their provision differently from England. Student debt had supposedly been privatised but was under-written by the Government whilst still being a massive burden imposed on graduates' futures, except where parents could afford to pay fees or pay off the loans for their offspring. Notwithstanding the huge growth of higher education, mass illiteracy and innumeracy was and remains the fate of millions who simply failed at every level of schooling.

In Australia, universities expanded exponentially in this period and the Bradley Review in 2009 led to the introduction of the demand-driven system and participation targets for under-represented groups. The total number of students rose from around 1 million in 2008 to 1.5 million in Australia's 37 publically funded and four private universities over a decade and in 2020 more than 40 per cent of Australians between the ages of 25–35 had a bachelor degree or higher. A wide range of disciplines can be studied in Australian universities and great efforts have been made to offer open and mixed modes of learning so that many different types of people can be supported in their learning. Over the past decade, the number of students from the poorest quarter of Australian households has increased by 60 per cent. Yet despite such significant increase in numbers of targeted groups, many remain under-represented, for example, Indigenous people, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from remote and rural areas (Smith & Skrbis, 2017). People from major cities are twice as likely to hold a degree as those from remote or regional areas. By contrast, the internationalisation of Australia's higher education system has been tremendously successful in that Australia's international student population is the highest of any OECD country. The education of Australia's international students is Australia's fourth-largest export behind iron ore, coal and natural gas and is valued at $40 billion a year and does not contribute to the egregious problems of environmental degradation and climate change.

Massive and significant change has occurred in higher education provision and real achievements have been made in the period we are considering. These changes have been part of the wider growth and change in economic and cultural life across the world, though they always have a vital local and regional dimension. We have

reflected on the beginnings of mass higher education and now perhaps we can extrapolate our understanding to wider themes as we continue to negotiate globalisation, modernity, change and challenge in the current conjuncture.

5.2 Where Are We Now?

This is a disarmingly simple question with a confusingly large and complicated backstory (Featherstone, 1990; Fieldhouse, 1996; Williams, 1997). Fundamentally our modern but outdated education system has evolved (through struggle) historically as the hand-maiden of industry (Jackson & Marsden, 1962; Johnson, 1988). Right up to the late twentieth century quite high levels of unskilled male and female labour were required for the industrialised economies. Additionally, cohorts of the skilled and trained, mostly men, were needed for the factories, mines and construction sites. These were augmented by a managerial class of overseers, organisers and professionals qualified in many branches of science, engineering, technology and business, topped off by a financial elite able to control and extend capital investment and financial services necessary for capitalist businesses to survive and thrive. The state itself needed a managed bureaucracy and eventually, social welfare and healthcare system emerged. Crucial to all this was the existence of a large population of unskilled and semi-skilled people needed to create surplus value and profit whose higher educational needs were held to be insignificant or even non-existent and had been denied for generations by those set above them in authority, power and wealth.

The needs of industry, though a tremendously powerful force in shaping education, were not alone. Industrialisation also brought with it social differentiation and the creation of different forms and levels of economic, political and social power. The demands and struggles for rights and social justice of working people historically were often also concurrent demands for schooling and education to lift themselves out of poverty and want and if not for themselves for their children. This is a narrative that has still to run its full course and the provision and meaning of education are contested terrain even in wealthy and economically developed nations. What was clear was the fact that education mattered to all sections of society and was a key arena of social policy for nation building and social progress.

In many societies and communities selective and fee-paying private schools have become a major route by which economic and socially exclusive elites secure future advantages for their own children. In addition, the middle classes in many parts of the world have attempted to protect the future of their children and families by using education as a means to enter the higher echelons of public life as well as accessing professional and business life (Ball, 2010; Power et al., 2003). School and university systems the world over are not all of a piece of course. Faith-based schools and universities, for example, often have as part of their missions the fostering of social inclusion and a concern for social justice which seeks to mitigate the differences of wealth and privilege amongst their communities. In some cases, they support and teach a values-based common core curriculum (Hirst, 2015).

Since the 1980s university academics have pointed to the dysfunctional impacts of the marketisation of social, cultural and educational life under neo-liberalist policies and to the continuous increase in social inequality that has resulted (Featherstone, 1990; Nederveen Pieterse, 2020). The conjuncture 30 years on from the original analysis highlights some themes which help explain why mass higher education has not brought about the transformations many supposed were underway as the new institutions and campuses began to be built and globalisation, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism surged ahead (Featherstone ibid; O'Flaherty et al., 2007). The new world order meant a global culture where learning could be bought and sold as a national enterprise yet could be delivered internationally. Education also became a driver in economic performance and social dynamics as greater connectivity called for innovation and training in new skills. Learning was needed everywhere by the millions and masses but it could not prevent the enormous concentration of financial power where the impact of neoliberal globalisation has produced a world in which a handful of billionaires own as much wealth as half the world's population. This sits alongside shifts in perception where liberal market economies are viewed as under threat from inside and out and where at best we can speak of anxieties about the future (Nederveen Pieterse ibid). There are no clear and unequivocal master narratives for us to follow and there always existed a question of the role of education in the wider society where it hardly ever played the decisive or determining role. Education helps reproduce society and creates space and opportunity for challenge and change but it does not control or manage the central nodes of decision making and it does not confront unequal political power and the system of social differentiation.

At the pinnacle of the system of social differentiation today are the so-called elite universities. Ultimately, however, it was the 'mass produced' universities that exercised the power to admit very large numbers of students and confer the qualifications which are used to distribute scarce opportunities and jobs for the bulk of the population. Theirs was the promise and the power to bring freedom through education. A mass higher education system has however emerged hand in hand with highly selective and wealthy 'elite' institutions occupying the high ground of status and prestige. Whilst institutions apparently compete for resources and status, the playing field is frequently not fairly level and entry to the elite by the newer and less well-endowed universities is severely restricted.

For the majority of contemporary graduates, the conjunction of mass graduation and 'de-skilling' of many graduate/professional jobs threatens their futures and limits their options. What once required a first degree now requires a masters as the premium qualification. In the 2020s the undergraduate degree on its own is now relatively worthless as a passport to a lucrative, stable and prestigious career. Given this unanticipated outcome of mass participation, what kind of freedom, choices and future prospects has higher education now produced for the broad mass of the people? And is this not an indictment of the utilitarian understanding of the value of learning and education which came to prominence in the era of market liberalisation at the end of the last century? (Casey, 1995; Edwards, 1998).

The marketised model of a university where students pay for what they get in a competitive and differentiated 'learning market' has prevailed since it was identified

as a feature of the neo-liberal economy (Edwards ibid: 1998). The consumerist ethos dominates in a market where you get what you pay for from a hierarchy of providers who distribute unequal access to jobs and futures. This system does not work well for the majority of graduates let alone for those who are outside the campus gates with lesser qualifications for work which may disappear as changing investment flows drive jobs overseas. Most worryingly for a large number of graduates from the non-elite universities, the prestigious work their credentials might have earned them in the past is disappearing as automation and artificial intelligence remove whole layers of intermediate professional jobs and careers. What remains for many is lower status, lesser skilled and worse paid jobs that previously did not require a degree as the entry point to working life.

As for the universities themselves, they have over generations valorised the academic hierarchies of subjects with mathematics, medicine, sciences, languages and law at the top of the list of high-status subjects everywhere in the world whilst humanities and the arts and the social/human sciences are relegated to the bottom. Nevertheless, reality has a way of imposing itself and shaping future prospects and the clear fact is that within 40 years everyone studying or working now is likely to be retired and the knowledge they acquire now will be redundant in terms of its usefulness for work long before this. The degrees being issued currently to the mass student 'market' are a key signal for this future, not because study at an advanced level is ever just worthless, far from it, but because technological and industrial change is so fast and pervasive and so globally structured that any given skill set embodied in a degree is likely to become outdated. Unless something else is possessed, the degree holder is also likely to be economically redundant. The knowledge that universities took for granted as their right to own and define came under challenge towards the end of the last century (Barnett, 1997; Becher, 1989; Gibbons et al., 1994; Lyotard, 1984) and forced attempts at rethinking the role of academic tribes and territories in the twenty-first century (Trowler et al., 2012). Whether what we might call root and branch reform of the university academic structure actually occurred is moot, as the conservative force of tradition was brought to bear and continues to act as a brake on change.

What is required in the third decade of the twenty-first century is a conceptual shift and a strategy to re-think some of the fundamental purposes of public higher education. This must surely revolve around the idea of creativity, which itself will drive our need to re-think how we provide learning. There will also be a need to re-invent the notion of critical thinking for a change and for universities this will require a re-assessment of the social purposes of learning and engagement with communities in addition to the rethinking of what might be a critical pedagogy for social justice (McArthur, 2013; Smyth, 2011). Whichever path is chosen the point of departure must surely involve learning and education which takes us from the debates and concerns of the previous period (Jary & Parker, 1998) to that of the new and emerging reality and its prospects (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008; Bell, 2018).

5.3 Future Prospects: Learning for Creativity

Academic intelligence that has set up the hierarchy of subjects and disciplines should be questioned and challenged (McArthur, 2010). The system that evolved to serve industrialism is no longer fit for purpose and we cannot continue to disregard and then dispense with the intelligence and creativity of the majority of our people whilst forcing those who succeed into the straight-jacket of subject disciplines which can no longer be relevant to the future. Nobody knows what will happen to our future and the best we can do is to liberate the creativity and imaginations of as many of our learners as we can. The whole curriculum of formal schooling and university education needs reforming and re-structuring around notions of creative thinking and action. Music, art, creative literature, dance, film, story-telling and environmental action should be re-positioned in the curriculum. Of course the 'positivistic' or fact-based subjects encoded into disciplines with formal knowledge can be accessed remotely or via distance learning technologies. They do not need the existential and experiential learning that creativity demands. The need for technologists, medical and specialist professional staff and levels of learning skill and competence will be needed and sustained, but their requirements need not drive the hierarchies of status and reward in the distorting and ineffective way they do currently.

Our era is obsessed with measuring, quantifying and ranking achievement. It is fixated on performativity and professional lives are dominated by targets, impact assessments, league tables and stock-taking audits. Away from work, our lives devolve onto social media and the technological 'fix' of the internet engages us mainly with the 'busyness' of others who create for us the online and virtual experiences we appear to think to belong to us. Public, social and cultural 'awareness' is suffused into the apps we buy and consume online in a process we do not create or control ourselves. All public space becomes available for commoditisation and commercialisation. Our connections to the world around us become the property of others and we lose the capacity to shape the actions and events of our lives. Mathew Crawford in his influential book 'The World Beyond Your Head' (2015) says that there are… 'darker precincts of "affective capitalism" where our experiences are manufactured for us'. We are the objects of others' intentions and actions not of our own and our subjective selves are diminished as we rely on consuming rather than creating our own realities—imperfect though they no doubt are.

Learning for creativity is an answer to part of the problem (Robinson, 2016). Not everyone can be artistically creative but we cannot continue educating people out of creativity. We need to learn in different ways. Creativity is one of the departure points to more critical and improved education. It is also part of an ecological form of learning where creativity need not be exclusively identified with the arts. Knowledge and culture from a very diverse set of sources can be used if we start from the perspective that all cultures have potentially equal value and that much is to be learned from, for example, indigenous knowledge especially perhaps in respect of the environment, care for the land, respect for wild-life and the care and custodianship of an ever more fragile planet. The curriculum could be radically re-arranged to

accommodate this agenda for change, which is conterminously and existentially an agenda for planetary survival. The integration of environmental issues with issues of human survival and development—employment, education, health and nutrition—has only begun recently. The emphasis (bias) on 'green issues' though crucially important to our understanding of ecological crises, is not aided by the separation of academic fields and professional practice into the natural and social sciences. We surely need to understand 'environmental justice' in the overall context of social justice and communal life. We need to understand also how social class and poverty and poor housing may be related to identity and ethnic issues—all of which have become the concern of environmental education and should be the subject of creative and critical learning.

5.4 A Critical and Dynamic Curriculum for an Uncertain World

The challenging economic and social realities of the late 20th and early twenty-first century have been accompanied by a rapidly changing knowledge base. Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) has called this an ending of traditional epistemologies. He argues that the knowledge economy has expanded not only in relation to employment opportunities but also in terms of its structure and reach. New fields of knowledge and expertise are created continuously and expand beyond the old boundaries. The knowledge and information-based service industries, for example, have grown exponentially within recent decades and have merged in substantial ways into the leisure and entertainment industries.

It is also the case that learning itself is being transformed by the technologies of the information age. The new communication technologies have disrupted the fixed realities of time and space. This impacts economic and social life in fundamental ways. According to Castells (1996–1998), the global economy is maintained by endlessly complex financial flows. The industrial corporation has become a network, as opposed to the Taylorist hierarchy of control and production in a fixed place, normally a factory, of previous eras (Freeman, 2018). Social networks, as clusters of relationships, are no longer fixed in time and place and labour becomes disposable, literally across the world. Anyone can in theory be employed by any employer to work in the digital economy across all or any national boundary. In these circumstances, referred to as the 'network-society', individuals seek identity and meaning because although economies and communication networks are global, experience is local and regional. People still inhabit places and spaces which are dear to them and there is a longing for 'community' and belonging. In a sense, the globalising and techno-features of modern life are a new infrastructure in which we see the need for a more educated and autonomous working population on a global basis. The 'cosmopolitanism' in which people see themselves as beneficiaries of an increasingly interconnected world is sometimes counter-balanced, however, by a sense of loss of

culture and belonging (Bauman, 2001). This has been noted especially amongst diasporic migrant peoples and ethnic groups (Skrbis, 1999, 2017; Alder, 2013) and as a focus for resistance and cultural renewal on a global scale (Hall, 2017a, 2017b). A great social anthropologist once observed that … 'capitalism fuels the imagination's flight' (Brody, 1973) and the hyper-capitalism and networked society in which we live generates demand at speed for its products, which now include education as a key consumer item or positional good in the market for life chances and opportunities! The paradoxes of local versus global and national versus international are intrinsic to the turbo-capitalism and forces of change that is itself giving rise to increases in insecurity, instability and social inequality in many and varied nations across the globe. The imagination for what is desired is fuelled beyond reason by the immediate access available via the internet to the images of the world's riches and resources. Actual and real access and ownership of these resources is quite another matter though and on a world scale, there is a deepening of wealth inequalities and a heavy cost to the global economy (Foroohar, 2020). A commensurate curriculum that would enable universities to understand and teach for these revolutionary changes is needed which we might call a critical curriculum.

This thinking builds on the new epistemologies suggested by Giddens and also on the intellectual heritage of the Frankfurt School which taught us the value of interrogating surface reality to reveal the deeper currents of social thinking and ideologies. For learning to transform the object of study it must, first of all, know something of its self, its own limitations and origins (Habermas, 1972; Jeffries, 2017; Polanyi, 1974). If it is to transform reality into something better, knowledge and learning embodied in a curriculum must be self-critical!

If it is self-evident that learning, in general, is central to human experience, it is in the struggle to recognise and to overcome our own nature and circumstances that we become genuinely social beings. We must learn, not only to survive and prosper but because we want a better life which gives us more choice and opportunities. We can only truly learn in conditions of freedom and mutual association so the growth of knowledge and access to learning are still the keys to the wider goal of democracy and freedom.

The strategic design of learning for the future needs to engage with what is learned, the way it is learned and how this learning is relevant to those acquiring it. In other words, creative and critical learning demands what has been called a 'dynamic curriculum' (Teare et al., 1998). A dynamic curriculum first of all must incorporate the gains of recent years associated with modularity, credit transfer, student-centredness, IT-supported learning and flexible part-time and access provision. The dynamic curriculum model recognises the existence and validity of different 'discourses' and 'paradigms' within learning activity such as experiential learning, action-learning methodologies and workplace and community-based learning. When learning can take place everywhere why do we need university exclusive campuses and closed-off schools? The pedagogies we use and the ways of teaching we apply will also need to be radically re-shaped for a changing world.

The authentic freedoms to be gained through creative and critical learning cannot be bought off the shelf as if the university were simply a market for consumers.

A dynamic and critical curriculum surely will challenge the hierarchies of subjects and be a departure point for the unification of academic and vocational learning. The creation of a 'learning society' and unification of the academic and vocational divisions of learning both involve the transformation of higher education (and further education) and in particular how it organises its curriculum divisions and its teaching and learning (McArthur, 2010; Scott, 1997).

5.5 The Meaning of Vocational and Academic Education

Historically the division between 'vocational' learning and general education reflected the relation of divisions of the curriculum to employment, though some high-status 'academic' subjects were always vocationally focused such as medicine and law. These areas differed (and still do) in the types of students they attract and in the life chances they offer. Mass schooling towards the end of the nineteenth century institutionalised the boundaries of education which were mostly co-terminus with social class. These have substantially persisted, with modifications for the impact of racial, ethnic and gender factors, unfortunately up to the present (Dorling, 2017; Reay et al., 2005). In Britain in general the hewers of wood and drawers of water and the bashers of metal got the three Rs, whilst the ruling elites were schooled in the classics, sciences and humanities in their public schools which were in reality exclusively private. The ethos, the curriculum and the style of these schools became the model for those who were 'selected out' from the masses to be given a grammar school education so as to occupy the intermediate stations of the British and other economies and states as they evolved through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was clear to many if not to all that a learning society requires no such divisive and ultimately dysfunctional boundaries and divisions (Robertson, 1995; Davies, 1995; Young & Spours, 1997; Fryer, 1997). More than two decades into the twenty-first century there is an awareness that realising the full potential of a majority plus the potential of the new information technologies means liberating the knowledge and willingness to learn of a vastly greater number of the workforce and population in general than had previously been thought necessary (Hockings, 2008; Sharpe et al., 2013; Walker & McLean, 2013).

The idea of unifying vocational and academic learning, however, is relatively new! Michael Gibbons and others (1994) and Peter Scott (1995, 1997) in the 1990s put forward challenging versions of alternative forms of knowledge as did Polanyi (1974) a generation before that. However, the idea of a learning society and the different meanings associated with it as well as its different policy implications, was relatively untested (Hillman, 1996; Robertson, 1995; Kennedy, 1997; DfEE, 1998). The suggestion we are making is that unifying academic and vocational learning should be seen as a way of promoting a learning society which is itself an intrinsic aspect of the freedoms education can bring to the wider population. The means of doing this could embrace greater student choice and the adoption of reflective models of teaching and learning—that is to say—critical pedagogy and dynamic

curriculum which stresses the importance of an expanded view of learning and insists that learning is a major feature of all social relationships—at the personal level, the institutional level and the societal level. A reflective model would of course need to encompass schooling and high levels of participation in both further and higher education provision, the continued growth of qualifications available for all and the extension of access models for education and training throughout people's lives. Following Schon's (1983, 1987) and Freire's (1972) earlier work, reflective practice and dialogue became a focus of pedagogical concern and policy in the 1990s (Casey, 1995; Dearing, 1997; Shor, 1992). This approach was in effect a key element in a model that challenged some of the dearest held beliefs of the status quo; those in which the academy had often been concerned with keeping people out and rationing the available places.

The alternative is a model of learning and education which is dedicated to open access, innovation, creativity, critical thinking and the social and cultural transformations needed for life in 50 years' time (Sharpe et al., 2013; Ashwin, 2015). It is also one that embraces critical thinking and systematic and scholarly critique of the dysfunctional power of the digital revolution which has impacted economic, social and educational life in profound ways yet to be fully addressed by the academy (Zuboff, 2019; Foroorhar, 2020).

5.6 The Social Purpose of the University: The Promise Denied?

What has characterised the HE system since the mid-1980s has been extreme volatility and endemic and unpredictable change. This has been masked to a degree by the fact that change, generally speaking, meant growth. Mass higher education everywhere meant the emergence of a new and truly large scale industry. The economic and social and mass psychological pressure to attend university, especially for young people, has been immense all over the planet. Some nations such as the USA, Great Britain and Australia benefitted immensely and the pre-eminence of English and the relatively egalitarian access to the expanded institutions and campuses helped establish a widely perceived view that learning was crucial for opportunity and getting on in the world. The emergence of a flexible, inclusive and accessible culture of higher education has been due largely, though not exclusively, to the expansion of new and, in the UK, post-1992 polytechnics, universities and colleges of higher education. The Open University once described as 'the last gasp of social democracy' from the labour inspired post-war social democratic settlement, became the largest university in the UK. As a model of open access and as a creative force in open and distance learning methods and pedagogies the OU became a world class presence in educational opportunity. The question which remains unanswered is whether mass higher education stalled in the attempt to democratise learning and thus change social life in Britain and elsewhere in any deep sense? The belief in meritocratic ideals as

the powerhouse for combatting social and educational inequality, though deeply held and widely practised, has proved to be less than adequate in many societies in bringing about changes necessary for a more equal and fairer society (Ball, 2010; Reay et al., 2005). At its worst, it has proved mendacious, for example in British private schooling where vested interests ensure that the charitable purposes of such schools are corrupted to accentuate the already privileged children of the wealthy and thus help to deny millions of children a fair start in life (Green & Knyaston, 2019; Verkaik, 2019). In Australia, it has been argued that emphasising meritocracy may compound the disadvantages young people experience from less educated or vocational backgrounds, including those from rural parts of the nation and those from indigenous communities (Smith & Skrbis, 2017). The phenomenal growth in the number of higher education institutions and the engagement of millions of more students did not come with a democratic mandate to empower either learners or teachers to produce a better, more equitable society or a more secure future. In a sense, the expansion of the new came at the cost of their own subjugation. The older elite institutions were encouraged to expand at the same moment also and became as might have been expected the 'standout' performers with their already acquired cultural and financial resources. No major strategic changes in curricular thinking took place in respect of the need for critical and transformative learning required for the new century and its challenges.

Throughout the transition to what is often referred to as 'modernity' (Giddens, 1990) and includes the transition to mass higher education, the elite (so-called) universities have not changed fundamentally and their students, pedagogies and performances are predominantly traditional, expressing and reinforcing a hierarchical, selective, elitist and ultimately divisive culture. Alongside elite schools, they form what has been termed 'engines of privilege' (Green & Knyaston, 2019). It is, however, lifelong learning perspectives and critical thinking, as part of a widening participation agenda, which yield the capacity for a socially purposive higher education. This implies a new and much deeper radical reform of what we mean by learning and critical thinking and how we can conceptualise university engagement with communities, as opposed to simply responding the perceived needs of industry or business. Universities are needed as engines of democracy where communicative action and participatory norms act as a counterweight to social exclusion and division. This was a key concern in the previous century and is surely our new departure point in the present one?

The new and more volatile twenty-first-century environment which we associate with globalisation and the impact of social and economic crises along with the potentially catastrophic impact of climate change and environmental degradation provides the opportunity to re-shape universities in accordance with the radical agenda of lifelong learning and to build upon the legacies and struggles for higher and continuing education as a realistic and socially purposive objective. In this global era young people often seek out cultural experiences and forms of identity which counter a stationary and insular parochial life. Even before the current internet-driven and globalised youth culture impacted cosmic awareness, young people were generationally restive and were the sources of renewal and energy for the future (Brake,

1980; WPCS, 1975). High levels of social and physical mobility are both a necessity and an expectation for young people and they need knowledge and learning which is adequate for this challenge, which is immense and daunting (Nyland et al., 2016; Skrbis et al., 2014). The key elements to be addressed are still poverty, deprivation, social injustice and social exclusion and now more than two decades into the twenty-first century no one can deny that there is still much to be done through an expanded education system and a new culture of inclusion and wider participation.

5.7 Conclusion: A Promise Postponed

Millions in the twenty-first century now benefit from higher education which expanded in the twentieth century and lifelong learning is a palpable reality for many, if still not all who could benefit. The university experience is now available nearly everywhere and mass higher education has not only outgrown the existing 'pre-ordained' elite system, but it has in effect invented another—with its own hierarchies and its differing unique selling points, which are not at all unique in reality. New universities in particular have also changed meanings and cultures in higher education. Specifically, they have changed modes of delivery: they have gone some way beyond the boundary; they have implemented some elements of a 'dynamic curriculum'; they have helped to re-conceptualise work and learning and to de-monopolise knowledge; they have broadened and extended the range of academic and professional disciplines and they have challenged existing epistemologies through developing credit systems, modularity and new, open pedagogies. They have continued to grow educational opportunities and to widen participation on an ever-lower resource basis for those who will not be admitted or choose not to attend the elite institutions.

In the main, however, the inheritors of the old system have adapted themselves to the global changes outlined above. A mass higher education system is now represented as a hierarchy of social and educational value and worth and is now part of the economic infrastructure and the social hierarchies of many nations. The social meanings and importance represented by the university league tables are in the heads of the people and hopes for their children are often channelled through these selections. Socially and culturally, the whole future of each succeeding generation leaving school is shaped by what universities are and do. Today the social aspirations of many are projected onto the front runners in the university league tables. There is now a mass higher education system almost everywhere in the developed world which is highly differentiated and which functions to buttress an economy and society which is profoundly unequal and unfair, whilst at the same time bringing opportunities undreamed of by the forebears of today's students. This paradox was never designed as a purpose for the growth of higher learning; it emerged as an unintended consequence of historical processes and change which few if any thought were relevant to the provision of higher learning. It is a truism now, but nevertheless still valid, that we must learn from history, for those who do not understand their own history are

condemned to repeat it. What surely can be learned from the growth of mass higher education is that moments of historical change in the content and function of education are also moments most characteristically in sympathy with the idea of freedom. We still need therefore an awareness of the true content and meaning of education which is self-critical and which is able to define itself in terms of its contribution to freedom.

In reality, whereas changes in the outside and globalised world have often been swift and profound, the pace of change within parts of our society and culture has often been glacially slow! Our system is still based upon forms of educational selection and division, which are inimical to authentic freedom and as a whole, it remains in thrall to class-based and cultural divisions. At its most elite levels and in respect of the needs of socially deprived and excluded communities, including in many places indigenous people and ethnic minorities, it can be corrosively divisive. Universities have increased participation but the challenge remains—to widen access for the persistently excluded, lower socio-economic classes and to engage for a genuine transformation to a socially just society. This means a challenge to notions of 'mission diversity' and 'quality' which operate to legitimise the continuing disproportionate recruitment of the more affluent groups to the elite institutions, to the long-term detriment of those universities which are combatting exclusion and to all of us who aspire to a more cohesive and fair society. Enhancing access to an unjust system and to elite institutions has proved to be elusive as far as re-drawing the boundaries of possibility are concerned. We need access to something much more profound so the promise is delayed not denied. The route will surely be via a re-definition of learning so that not only can individuals benefit from learning opportunities but through organised collective action and engagement in which a sustainable and more just society can be envisaged. Universities are uniquely placed to carry this agenda forward.

An American ballad put the matter eloquently and succinctly …." freedom doesn't come like a bird on the wing, doesn't come down like the falling rain". It surely comes through learning, critical thinking and the continuing struggle for something better for all.

References

Alder, J. (2013). *A multigenerational analysis of Derby's Post-War polish community visiting their Ancestral Homeland*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Derby 2013.

Ashwin, P., & associates. (2015). *Reflective teaching in higher education.* Bloomsbury Academic.

Ball, S. (2010). New class inequalities in education, why education policy may be looking in the wrong place! Education policy, civil society and social class. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 30*(3/4), 155–66.

Barnett, R. (1997). A Knowledge Strategy for Universities. In R. Barnett, & A. Griffin (Eds), *The end of knowledge in higher education.* Cassell.

Barnett, R. (2000). *Realising the university in an age of supercomplexity*. SRHE and Open University Press.

Barnett, R., & Di Napoli, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Changing identities in higher education: Voicing perspectives*. Routledge.
Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories*. Open University Press.
Bell, S. (2018). The critically engaged university of the future. *Transform: The Journal of Engaged Scholarship No 1*.
Bell, S. (2019). Re-imagining the university as an anchor institution. *Transform: The Journal of Engaged Scholarship No 1*.
Brake, M. (1980). *The sociology of youth culture and youth cultures: Sex and drugs and rock'n'roll?* Routledge & Keegan Paul.
Brody, H. (1973). *Inishkillane: Change and decline in the west of Ireland*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
Casey, C. (1995). *Work*. Routledge.
Castells, M. (1996–98). The Rise of the Network Society (Vol. 1). The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (Vol. 2). The Power of Identity (Vol. 3). *The End of the Millennium*. Blackwell.
Crawford, M. (2015). *The world beyond your head: How to flourish in an age of distraction.* Viking/Penguin.
Davies, D. (1995). *Credit where it's due: credit frameworks and learning outcomes.* University of Cambridge and UK Government Department of Employment.
Davies, D., & Nyland, J. (2018). Critical thinking for an engaged university. *Journal of Co-Operative Studies, 52*(2), 2018.
Dearing, S. R. (1997). *The summary report—Higher education in a learning society*. NCIHE.
DfEE (1998). *The learning age: a renaissance for a new Britain.* HMSO/ DfEE.
Dorling, D. (2017). *Peak inequality: Britain's ticking timebomb.* Policy Press.
Edwards, M. (1998). Commodification and control in mass education: A double edged sword. In D. Jary, & M. Parker (Eds), *The new higher education: Issues and directions for the Post-Dearing University*, Staffordshire University.
Featherstone, M. (Ed.). (1990). *Global culture: Nationalism.* Sage.
Fieldhouse, R., & associates. (1996). A history of modern British adult education. NIACE.
Finegold, D., et al. (1992). *Higher education—Expansion and Reform.* IPPR.
Finegold, D., & Soskice, D. (1998). The failure of training in Britain: Analysis and prescription. *Oxford review Of Economic Policy, 3*(4).
Foroohar, R. (2020). *Don't be evil: The case against big tech.* Allen Lane/Penguin.
Freeman, J. B. (2018). *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*, NY: Norton and Company.
Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Sheed and Ward.
Fryer, R. (Report) (1997). *Learning for the 21st Century*. DfEE: London.
Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., & Trow, M. (1994). *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary society*. Sage.
Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Polity Press.
Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self identity: Self and society in the late modern age.* Stanford University Press.
Green, F., & Knyaston, D. (2019). *Engines of privilege: Britain's private school problem.* Bloomsbury Publishing.
Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests.* Heinemann.
Hall, S. (2017a). *Familiar stranger: A life between two Islands*. Allen Lane.
Hall, S. (2017b). *The fateful triangle: Race ethnicity nation.* Harvard University Press.
Hillman, J. (1996). *A University for Industry: Creating a national learning network*. London IPPR.
Hirst, J. (2015). *Australia's Catholic University: The first twenty-five years.* Australian Catholic University.
Hockings, C. (2008). *Learning and teaching for diversity and difference in higher education: Towards more inclusive learning environments, Teaching and Learning Research Briefing, 41.* Teaching and Learning Research Briefing.

Hockings, C. (2010). *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: A synthesis of research.* Higher Education Academy. Available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/EvidenceNet/Syntheses/inclusive_teaching_and_learning_in_he_synthesis_200410.pdf

Jackson, B., & Marsden, D. (1962). *Education and the Working Class.* Routledge & Keegan Paul.

Jary, D., & Parker, M. (1998). *The new higher education: Issues and directions for the Post-Dearing university.* Staffordshire University Press.

Jeffries, S. (2017). *Grand hotel Abyss: The lives of the Frankfurt School*. Verso.

Johnson, R. (1988). Really useful knowledge 1790–1850: Memories for education in the 1980s. In T. Lovett (Ed), *Radical approaches to adult education.* Routledge.

Kennedy H. (Report) (1997). *Learning works: Widening participation in further education.* Coventry: FEFC.

Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Manchester University Press.

McArthur, J. (2010). Time to look anew: Critical pedagogy and disciplines within higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 35*, 301–315.

McArthur, J. (2013). *Rethinking knowledge in higher education: Adorno and social justice.* Bloomsbury.

Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2020). *Global culture, 1990, 2020, Theory, culture & Society special section on Global Culture Revisited*. (TCS 37 (7–8) Dec 2020 edited by Mike Featherstone.

Nyland, J., Davies, D., & Clarke, E. (2016). Climb Every Mountain! Conquering Queensland's 'Cliff' Year through Learning Innovation. *Literacy Information and Computer Journal (LICEJ), 7*(1), 2180–2197.

O'Flaherty, M., Skrbis, Z., & Tranter, B. (2007). Home visits: Transnationalism among Australian migrants. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30*(5), 2007.

Polanyi, M. (1974). *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*. Chicago University Press.

Porter, J. (1999). *Reschooling and the global future.* Symposium Books.

Power, S., Edwards, T., Whitty, G., & Wigfall, V. (2003). *Education and the middle class.* Open University Press.

Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. J. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race, and gender in higher education.* Trentham Books.

Robertson, D. (1995) 'The reform of higher education for social equity, individual choice and mobility. Chapter 3 In Coffield (ed) *Higher Education in a Learning Society*. University of Durham on behalf of DFEE, ESRC and HEFCE.

Robinson, K. (2016). *Creative schools.* Penguin.

Rowbotham, S. (1999). *Threads through time.* Penguin.

Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Temple Smith.

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Jossey-Bass.

Scott, P. (1995). *The meanings of mass higher education.* SRHE and Open University.

Scott, P. (1997). The Crisis of Knowledge and the Massification of Higher Education. Chapter 2 In R. Barnett, & A. Griffin (Eds), *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education, Institute of Education, University of London series*. Cassell.

Sharpe, R., Beetham, H., De Freitas, S., Conole, G. (2013). Introduction to rethinking learning for a digital age. In R. Sharpe, H. Beetham,& S. De Freeitas (Eds), *Rethinking learning for a digital age: How learners are shaping their own experiences.* Routledge.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change.* University of Chicago Press.

Skrbis, Z., Woodward, I., & Bean, C. (2014). Seeds of a cosmopolitan future? Young people and their aspirations for future mobility. *Journal of Youth Studies, 17*(5), 2014.

Skrbis, Z. (1999 and 2017). *Long distance nationalism: Diasporas, homelands and identities.* Routledge.

Smith, J. F., & Skrbis, Z. (2017). A social inequality of motivation? The relationship between beliefs about academic success and young people's educational attainment. *BERJ- British Educational Research Journal, 43*(3).

Smyth, J. (2011). *Critical pedagogy for social justice*. Continuum.

Teare, R., Davies, D., & Sandelands, E. (1998). *The virtual university*. Cassell.

Trow, M. (1974). Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education. *'Policies for Higher Education' from the general report on the conference on future structures of post-secondary education* (pp. 55–101). OECD.

Trow, M. (2006). Reflections in the transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII. In P. Altbach (ed), *International Handbook of Higher Education* (pp. 243–80), Springer.

Trowler, P., Saunders, M., & Bamber, V. (Eds.). (2012). *Tribes and territories in the 21st century: Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education.* Routledge.

Verkaik, R. (2019). *Posh BOYS: How English public schools ruin Britain.* One World.

Walker, M., & McLean, M. (2013). *Professional educational capabilities and contributions to the public good: The role of universities in promoting human development*. Routledge.

Watson, D. (2014). *The question of conscience: Higher education and personal responsibility*. Institute of Education Press.

Williams, J. (1997). *Negotiating access to higher education: The discourse of selectivity and equity*. Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Williams, J. (2013). *Consuming higher education: Why learning cannot be bought*. Bloomsbury.

Wills, G. (Ed.). (1998). *The knowledge game: The revolution in learning and communication in the workplace*. Cassell.

WPCS. (1975). Working Papers in cultural studies 7/8- Resistance through rituals. Summer 1975, University of Birmingham, UK: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

Young, M. D. F., & Spours, K. (1997). (1997) Unifying academic and vocational learning and the idea of a learning society. *Journal of Education Policy, 12*(6), 527–537.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.