

The tarnished jewel of Higher Education, UK

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I encounter many senior politicians, top civil servants in education departments, principals of schools and colleges across the globe who have spent what they describe as memorable and enjoyable years in British universities.

Their experiences range from initial degrees to PhDs. They will frequently comment on the warmth of welcome they received from fellow students, the high quality of their tutors, the proper intellectual demands of the courses, the robustness of the degree awarding process. They 'graduated world-wise', rooted in the UK.

These are sound reasons why large numbers of universities around the world seek to establish faculty and research partnerships with UK universities. In turn, this has been matched by the significant expansion of British Universities overseas, with campuses springing up across the globe to cater for students hungry for the product and reputation they offer.

Suffice to say, the holding of a British University degree – and what it implicitly says about the holder's good command of English – provides a strong professional passport back in the home country. And of course the holder has paid handsomely into UK coffers as an overseas student for that qualification.

Thus, we can take pride in a Higher Education system which is respected and cherished abroad. But what is the picture at home? It's rather different.

First, the major hike in undergraduate fees to £9,250 per annum has rightly drawn a sharp focus on value for money. Whilst those studying sciences may enjoy acceptable contact hours with tutors and in laboratories, many arts and humanities students have documented that they meet a tutor all too infrequently and sit in overcrowded lectures.

Second, the value-for-money focus has shone a light on some highly variable teaching. By any measure, teaching quality in schools has been transformed over

the past decade. Students moving from accomplished A level teaching into university seminars of mixed quality have not been slow to make comparisons.

Third, the pastoral care systems of a number of universities have been shown to be wanting, with respect to both home and international students. In particular, clumsy handling of a few high profile suicides of students and staff has drawn stinging criticism from student unions and staff associations.

Fourth, the Teaching Excellence Framework has been treated in a cavalier spirit by certain universities resting on historic reputations. Their irritated response to being awarded a *bronze* rather than the presumed *gold* has served only to reinforce students' views that complacency characterises too many universities.

Fifth, the unacceptable gap between many academic staff's salaries and those of the senior management has not surprisingly raised uncomfortable questions, including about poor governance.

Sixth, the behaviours of the Student Loans Company and the legislation which has allowed rises in interest rates on loans have unsettled everyone involved in the higher education sector. And these matters rest unresolved.

Seventh, there is the unthinking approach of a number of universities in their rampant unconditional offers of places to sixth-form students.

An unfortunate cocktail has emerged: students and their parents *perceive* that they are receiving a higher education experience that is mixed in quality, expensive and led by complacent vice-chancellors.

At home, the much treasured jewel of British Higher Education is currently tarnished.

Urgent action is required to prevent apparently out-of-control elements in HE not only further tarnishing the reputation of the sector, home and abroad, but – through unthinking use of unconditional offers - damaging the very integrity of our gold standard A levels.

Self-regulation in the sector has used up its last chance. Considered and effective action from the regulator, the Office for Students, is imperative. Everyone in education is watching closely.

Roy Blatchford CBE is founding director of the National Education Trust and was formerly an HMI. His latest collection of essays is 'Success Is A Journey', available from the John Catt Educational bookshop. He currently chairs ASCL's Commission 'The forgotten third'.