STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: THE CHALLENGES FACED BY UK UNIVERSITY LEADERS

HEATHER EGGINS

LUCY CAVENDISH COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

ABSTRACT

All countries and their education systems are affected by the high level of uncertainty brought about by the speed of technological change, the effects of globalisation in causing a backlash towards nationalism and protectionism, and a cultural shift in some countries towards the denigration of intellectual endeavour. The UK university system, which thrived in the European Higher Education Area and contributed considerably to its research output, has found itself in danger of becoming isolated from its continental European partners. This seminar examines the particular uncertainties faced by the leaders of British higher education institutions in 2020, following the decision to leave the EU, but before the negotiations with the EU are finalised, and the position of the universities is unknown. The areas affected by Brexit include the loss of EU students, the loss of EU staff, the loss of research funding and collaborative research with universities in Europe, and the possible loss of Erasmus exchanges.

There are, though, other areas of uncertainty that might affect the financial viability of universities. The two major ones are the problem of university pensions: the main provider for the old established group of universities is the Universities Superannuation Scheme, which is technically bankrupt, and running into ever greater losses, despite the recent rises in contributions. Strikes of teaching staff have taken place, and are scheduled to take place in the future. The other major uncertainty is a Review of financial arrangements for the English universities, which was published last May. This recommended major cuts in the fees charged to students, which are loaned by the government: if those recommendations were enacted, then university budgets would be difficult to balance. The seminar is based on the findings of a series of interviews with Chairs of University Councils and Vice-Chancellors, and discusses the ways in which they have adjusted the strategy of their institutions to meet the sudden change in circumstances. Their resilience and adaptability is paramount.

Heather Eggins

Biography

Heather Eggins is a Fellow Commoner at Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge and Visiting Professor at Sussex University and at Staffordshire University UK. She also serves as a Member of the Court of Governors at Northampton University. Her career has spanned both higher education management, teaching and research. After a period of teaching at the University of Warwick, she moved to the University of Colorado, USA at Boulder, and combined teaching with the post of Editor for the University. From there she moved to teach at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, followed by a period at the Council for National Academic Awards, and then the post of Director of the Society for Research into Higher Education, an NGO of UNESCO. In 2006 she was awarded a prestigious Fulbright New Century Scholarship, based at the Boston College Center for International Higher Education, USA. She has considerable experience as a Board Member of university Councils, having served full terms at both the University of Ulster and Northampton University.

Her research interests are in higher education policy: she is particularly interested in the impact of government decisions on higher education, access issues, quality, and gender. She has established a
reputation as both an author and an editor, and has eleven volumes to her name. Recent books include work which was developed from the Fulbright research ‘Access and Equity: Comparative Perspectives’ (2010) Sense; and ‘Drivers and Barriers to Achieving Quality in Higher Education’ (2014) Sense Publishers, a volume exploring the findings of a major project funded by the EACEA Programme of the European Commission. Her latest publications are Heather Eggins, editor, The Changing Role of Women in Higher Education: Academic and Leadership Issues (2017) Springer, and a chapter, ‘The Challenges of Brexit: UK Higher Education Governing Councils Responding to Sudden Change’ in L. Weimar and T. Nokkala, editors, Universities as Political Institutions – HEIs in the Middle of Academic, Economic and Social Pressures (Brill 2020). Her current research interest is in the effects of government decisions in relation to Brexit on UK university strategy, with a study of ways in which university Boards have adjusted their strategy to the changing circumstances.