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A VIEW FROM THE GOLDSMITHS BRIDGE

CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ARTS, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY IN POST-BREXIT UK

by ALEKSANDAR BRKIC*

Summary

Prior to the beginning of the covid19 pandemic, a perfect storm was on the horizon for the Higher Education system in the United Kingdom. This article, a summary of conference intervention, is discussing the elements of this storm reflected on Goldsmiths University in London, one of the leading arts, social sciences and humanities Universities in the UK. Some of these influences are coming from the politics, Artificial Intelligence, geopolitics, legacies of colonialism and processes of «decolonization», marketization of education, and the treatment of arts as work. This is a contribution to the calls for rethinking of the position, form, purpose and values of the Higher Education in the light of new social, political and technological changes.

Keywords: Higher Education, United Kingdom, Artificial Intelligence, AI, politics and Higher Education, decolonization, poets for hire

JEL code: I23, I24, Z11

1. Introduction

In the year 2023 academics in the UK started rapidly engaging in mostly dystopian conversations about the influence of the AI platforms such as ChatGPT on the Higher Education ecosystem. And while the ground started severely shaking, a lot of us were questioning academic positions what can be my alternative career? Luckily for them, number of academics present at the conference «Culture shapes our future: The role of culture in the framework of economic, social, environmental

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and cultural development»¹ were close to retirement or already retired. Nevertheless, a lot of my colleagues in the UK have been actively discussing what else can they do now that this (expected) future is happening.

What I want to briefly showcase is a snapshot from the UK Higher Education context, having the experience from Goldsmiths, University of London, as my main focal point. Although the United Kingdom is not part of the European Union anymore, UK HE framework has often been used as the blueprint for different HE systems internationally, for its good, bad and ugly aspects. What is happening in the UK HE often transforms to a not-so-distant future for some European countries (not to mention former British colonies, and the hard and soft influence UK still has there).

2. The context of this story

Let's briefly place the story within the context. From 1994 until 2010, New Labour governments led by Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown, repositioned the Higher Education in the UK in the same way as they did with the culture and the arts. Higher Education was definitely transformed into an industry, which was unstoppably growing, financially and politically supported by the State. As any other service industry, step by step it started moving towards the concepts of service providers and customers. It was a hybrid model where HE was with one foot in the Subsidy Lake and with the other in the Lake Market. Even those academics that one could position left from the center of political/ideological specter, enjoyed this period and felt that they had the platform and resources to do teaching and research the way they believed was right (pun intended). And then came a long period of Conservative governments in the UK (2010-2024). Year after year it was becoming evident that Tory governments were applying strategy of embracing the industry part of the HE, supporting STEM, while slowly but surely trying to get rid of the «Marxist», «leftist», «woke» elements in the social sciences, humanities and the arts. This could be easily named performing Brexit or performative Brexit strategy, which also merged perfectly well with the COVID and post-COVID complex environment (2020-2023).

At the same time, the view from the perspective of political élite was that the arts (as creative industry) are seen mostly as potential investment and translated into money in a very literal sense. During Covid pandemic, in October 2020, Chancellor Rishi Sunak (who later became the Prime Minister) suggested that those in the arts should look to find new opportunities – «Can things happen in exactly the way they did? No. But everyone is having to find ways to adapt and adjust to the new reality». New reality was the new paradigm. Tony, a trombonist,

becomes a delivery driver, and Emily, an oboist, waitress. And we know how much talent, time and practice is invested in one trombonist or an oboist. Still, the system was saying – well, it's their choice. They are part of so called «lifestyle economy», meaning that you don't contribute with what you do to the GDP as the main (only?) success indicator of one society.

3. What happened at Goldsmiths: a perfect storm

Goldsmiths was particularly flagged as a center of so-called destructive Marxist academics, as a place promoting «woke culture». Instead of being platforms for discussion, debate and critical thinking, universities became the fighting grounds and platforms for the «culture wars» polarization narrative. Covid pandemic gave those in power a perfect excuse for a new support criterion based on new priorities, selecting those educational institutions that proved to be useful in the light of the pandemic, and leaving those useless to themselves (and the market). Social sciences, humanities and the arts were left stranded on the island of uselessness. They were not literally saving lives and not instantly creating new jobs, contributing to the development to economy. The Office for Students, key regulatory body for the HE system in the UK, uses the statistics of students that immediately get jobs (in the field of study) after they graduate as the main criteria of success of an academic programme.

And all those factors contributed to a perfect storm at Goldsmiths. Because of the post Brexit performativity, there is a dramatic decrease of students coming from the EU. They are treated as international students and must pay significantly higher fees – instead of a few thousand pounds, they need to pay £25,000 per year. Next factor is reduced number of UK students studying social sciences, humanities and the arts at universities. It is connected to the changes in demographics, cuts in art subjects on primary and secondary education level, but it mostly reflects the message of «uselessness» of what they would study, projected to them from the positions of power. Why would you invest into something that would later put you in such a bad starting position on the job market? There is also a significant rise of students from China, Southeast and East Asia at UK educational institutions, which pushes us to rethink the curriculum and pedagogy, but also makes the position of the University very volatile to global politics. In case of any kind of extreme conflicts in Asia, one of the consequences would be a severe hit to the UK HE system.

We can connect this trend with the parallel process of «decolonization of curriculum», which in the recent years became one of the central areas of rethinking of educational practice in the UK. There were different approaches to this process, and it was from the beginning

highly dependent on the context. A difficult question in the classroom is – what does it mean to initiate the decolonization process if you are a British lecturer, at a British university and, in the room, you almost don't have any British students? And in the programme I'm leading, there are almost 80% students from China in the current academic year. How do we start the discussion on decolonization? What is the position of our international students? And this became a puzzle for students too. Who is decolonizing who and why? Who is asking the question and why?

4. The so-called Transformation Programme

In 2019, the new Senior Management at Goldsmiths came up with the so-called Transformation Programme. They hired KPMG to analyze the position of our academic institution in the wider market, and come up with some suggestions for repositioning and changes University needs to make. KPMG was focusing mostly on the economic efficiency and effectiveness of the courses, programmes, departments, quantifying the outputs and putting the number to everything. For example, theatre department was seen through the eyes of KPMG as highly ineffective, since they were using large spaces for the training of students. And based on the small number of students they take per year, seen through the lenses of KPMG, their costs were simply not sustainable. This simplification of the goals of HE, and measuring mostly economic benefits, became a reality in the UK.

At the same time, one of the most important European philosophers, Franco Bifo Berardi, who was giving a guest talk at Goldsmiths just prior to the pandemic, was shouting in our Professor Stuart Hall building: «Poets are not doing their job! They need to explain to people that they don't need jobs...». And few years after that, the government is telling us: «Only those that have good jobs after they graduate are counted». And as educators, you're going to get fired if you don't provide them those jobs. Walking down the Thames River, near Tate Modern, I was often bumping into this guy sitting on a chair with a small desk, typewriter, and a sign: «Poet for hire». If you want to engage him, you sit there, give him £20 and have a short conversation. Based on that conversation and his impressions, he writes a poem for you. There you go – you made a poet create a job for himself. He's an entrepreneur now! This complex relationship between the notion and practice of job, work and creativity is something that is becoming more and more complex today, in the culture, as well as in the Higher Education in culture. Most of the things we do, and the ways we teach young people to do, contradicts the priorities that politicians and policy makers set for the society.

5. With the ChatGPT advent we need to rethink the whole concept of Higher Education

Since ChatGPT landed in our lives, Higher Education is in a state of confusion. Should we ignore, resist, accept or find some hybrid way of working with it? At Goldsmiths, this decision is still left to every programme or a Department. However, the reality is that regulations are not in place, and we are in the gray zone whenever students use one of the AI platforms to do their assignments. We can't use reverse AI platforms for detection, because they are not adopted by university regulations, and are seen as not reliable (enough). International students use AI based live translation apps at tutorials and lectures to understand what the lecturers and tutors are saying, putting academics in a difficult position – what are we trying to achieve in this learning and teaching process? If the AI platforms are doing all the processing and learning for us, what will be the purpose of the University as a space of exchange between humans? One of the scenarios is being tested – changing the forms of assignments, going back to more discussions, seminars, oral exams, and case study analysis. The reality is that no one believes this will be enough.

What I wanted to shortly present is this confusing moment which we need to discuss at all the tables. Yes, AI is our reality and nothing is going back to the «old normal», but we also need to deal with all other important questions in the space for education in culture and for culture at our universities. This space is used for various, mostly political experiments. Instead of being on a symbolic level a space for a social dialogue, it is used and misused by various actors as a space for expanding and extending polarizations. This is probably the moment to rethink the whole concept of Higher Education with its forms, but also purposes and values.

Notes

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