

Higher education policy and a future Labour government: distinguishing the probable from the possible

Howard Stevenson

Labour's current plans for universities are unpromising but transformation is never impossible

There is no doubt that it is now possible to contemplate seriously the ending of the series of Conservative-led governments that has been in place since 2010, and, concomitantly, the possibility of a Labour government, or possibly a Labour-led coalition, sometime in 2024. Given all that has happened in the last decade and more, starting with the Coalition government's appalling response to the economic crisis, it is not unreasonable to allow oneself a sense of anticipation about something that might be not only different, but better. Certainly, for those familiar with UK higher education, as either a student or staff member, the urgent desire for something different and better can justifiably manifest itself as borderline desperation. From the ratcheting up of tuition fees, as one of the

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

earliest acts of the Coalition government, to the car crash that is current university sector industrial relations, the urge for change is palpable.

Yet it is not clear how much anticipation it might be sensible to encourage. The detail of Labour's policy agenda is being closely guarded, and what clues are revealed almost always hint at scaling down expectation. Higher education is not immune from this lack of detail, and the gap between hopeful aspiration and realistic expectation is painfully difficult to reconcile.

In this article I try and bridge this gap by tempering some intellectual pessimism with some optimism of the will. The initial analysis looks at what we can currently understand about Labour's likely plans for higher education, and this is located in a wider analysis of Keir Starmer's pre-election strategy. It is argued that Labour's higher education policy agenda is likely to offer only limited potential for system improvements, and Labour is very unlikely to take on the serious system reforms that are needed. However, in the longer term it may be possible to pull a Labour government in the direction of a more radical agenda, but only if the left can construct a counter-hegemonic alliance around an alternative vision of higher education. Building such an alliance will be an extraordinary undertaking, but the current industrial disputes in the sector provide a base from which to build. The challenge, however, will be to build a much broader coalition of allies, and organically connect high-level thinking with grassroots movement building.

That was then ... this is now: higher education policy from Corbyn to Starmer

Any discussion of Labour Party policy beyond the next general election must begin with some broader analysis of Labour's pre-election strategy under Keir Starmer: this is central not only to understanding what is likely to be proposed as policy, but also for identifying the spaces that might exist for trying to shape it in progressive ways.

For some time now it has been abundantly clear that Starmer's strategy is almost entirely based on presenting Labour as the 'safe', 'credible' and 'no/low risk' alternative to a Tory Party that has run out of steam, and with which the electorate have lost their patience. The obvious comparison is with the mid-1990s, when the electorate had reached their limit with a long-serving, and self-serving, Tory government and decided it was time for a change. The assessment of Starmer, and

Soundings

those he has amassed around him, is that the country has reached a similar point. The country wants change. This does not mean there is any complacency, but the conclusion to be drawn is that the election is 'Labour's to lose'.

The inherent danger with this analysis as a broad electoral strategy is that it exerts a powerful pull to a bland centrism, at its worst including concessions here and there to some of the worst aspects of contemporary right-wing populism (for example in relation to immigration, or more recently the retreats on environmental policies). Its key aim is to establish 'credibility' - explicitly counter-posed to Tory incompetence, but often implicitly counter-posed to Corbyn-era Labour (with frequent proclamations that 'Labour has changed', see for example Keir Starmer's speech to the CBI in November 2022).¹ However, credibility is defined almost entirely in terms of technocratic competence and a commitment to manage the public sector 'better than the Tories'. Such an approach fails to recognise quite how broken Britain's public infrastructure is, but, more importantly, it completely fails to make the case for the qualitative transformation of public institutions that have been debased by years of neoliberal restructuring. It certainly makes no effort to make the case for transformative change, and to engage in the type of political campaigning that isn't only focused on winning votes, but also on changing minds and shifting political thinking.

In relation to education policy generally, and higher education policy specifically, the inevitable contrast is with Labour's position in the last general election, when a National Education Service was a key manifesto pledge.² The commitment to a National Education Service was undoubtedly a radical move - and one whose significance was frequently underestimated: attention most often focused on its cost, and the inevitable questions about 'affordability'. The real significance of the National Education Service, however, was the way it framed education as a public good, outside of market transactions, and existing to improve the quality of life both individually and collectively. In short, it was a radical and contemporary (re-)statement of traditional welfare-state values, which stood in stark contrast to today's approach to public services, with its focus on utilitarian goals, transactional exchanges and privatised relationships.

The 2019 manifesto stated: 'Labour will end the failed free market experiment in higher education, abolish tuition fees and bring back maintenance grants' (p41). Alongside these commitments, the manifesto pledged to review how

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

research and teaching is assessed, ensure adequate funding for all higher education institutions, encourage wider access, end casualised staff contracts, adopt a post-qualifications entry system and reform the Office for Students, so that its role was changed from being market regulator, and it became instead a body acting in the wider public interest.

By contrast, and consistent with the analysis presented above, in 2023 Labour's policy commitments on education remain muted, and include little detail. To date, Labour's policy narrative is framed around its 'Five missions' - which has some echoes of Tony Blair's five pledges in 1997.³ Education is included in the mission that aims to 'break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage' and 'shatter the class ceiling in Britain'. At this stage, policy commitments are vague - and much of the language is intended to connect with media-manufactured moral panics about declining 'standards', and a failure to address 'the basics'. Where there is evidence of prioritising, it is focused on Early Years provision; Shadow Minister Bridget Phillipson has clearly identified this as a key area of Labour's education policy.⁴ There is of course no doubt that Early Years education has suffered from too little attention for far too long, and this prioritisation should be welcomed. However, post-compulsory education has also suffered from neglect, most obviously in the further education sector, but also the university sector; and there is no obvious sign that reversing this situation is also a priority. References to further and higher education are extremely limited in any of the 'Five Missions' documents; any mentions there are largely focus on the economic contribution of higher education through research and knowledge production and the development of skills and human capital.

The elements that make up current Labour education policy resemble the mix of human capital and 'social mobility' that was a feature of the New Labour years. Some of the detail will be different, but education policy as economic policy (as per Tony Blair's description of education policy as 'the best economic policy there is') is clearly a central theme, albeit tempered by commitments to increase access. In the relevant section of the Five Missions briefing document, universities are discussed largely in terms of their contribution to the skills agenda, and their role in local economies. The importance of research is framed almost entirely in terms of its effect on economic competitiveness, in the context of a hyper-globalised economy. The following extract from the Five Missions briefing document highlights the issues:

Soundings

Our world-leading universities and the research they undertake should be a source of pride and are one of Britain's great strengths. The 2021 Research Excellence Framework found that the vast majority of UK university research was either 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent'. University spinouts, which commercialise this innovation, can directly drive-up economic growth and productivity. However, we lag behind countries like the United States in generating and scaling spin-outs. A Labour government will track spin-outs from universities with a dashboard to identify what's working and where there are barriers (p17).

The statements in the text are instructive. As with school education, managerialist accountability mechanisms, which have done so much to undermine morale across the education system, and which reduce working in educational institutions to little more than target-chasing, are to be left largely intact. Not only is the Research Excellence Framework quoted approvingly, but it will in future be buttressed by a 'dashboard' in which red lights will presumably flash when universities are not sufficiently driving up 'economic growth and productivity' by turning research into commercial success. It is apparently not enough to be 'world leading', because in the never-ending pursuit of 'constant improvement' even 'world leading' can never be good enough.

In the final section of the Five Missions document, the issues of funding and access are raised, recognising that 'the Conservatives' tuition fee system has long been broken' (p18), and that its currently proposed reforms will have a negative impact on women and the low paid. This was an area in which Labour's 2019 manifesto was at its boldest, promising not only to abolish tuition fees *in toto*, but also to reintroduce maintenance grants; and it was also a commitment that Keir Starmer was willing to support when he launched his 10 pledges as part of his leadership campaign. At the time, his social justice pledge promised to 'Support the abolition of tuition fees and invest in lifelong learning'.⁵ Alas, as with many of Starmer's 10 pledges - including those relating to public ownership of 'rail, mail, energy and water' - this radical commitment has been jettisoned. Instead a 'review' of university funding is being proposed, and one which is clearly working within a much more financially circumscribed remit. (*The Guardian* reported in May 2023 that several shadow cabinet ministers favour the introduction of a graduate tax, but there has been no policy statement on this.⁶)

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

From this brief analysis it is possible to say with confidence that those working and studying in higher education cannot expect to see a radical improvement in fortunes if a Labour government takes power some time in 2024. There is no doubt that there will be some visible improvements in policy, after years of Coalition and Tory governments, but it is also clear that fiscal conservatism will continue, and this means that public services are unlikely to get anything like the investment required. Furthermore, and within that context, higher education will be viewed as a relatively low priority, which will not only fail to secure the funding it desperately needs, but will not see the type of systemic reforms that are necessary for setting the university system on a very different trajectory. The fundamental problem is that Labour's approach to higher education seems to be based on the notion that the current system is fundamentally sound, and that minor policy tweaks, bringing about improvements here and there, will be sufficient. Student finance may be the focus of a more radical reform, but this will not be driven by a desire to relieve students of the cost of their education, but rather to apply some technocratic, and, crucially, cost-neutral, solution to a funding issue that is widely regarded as a problem. In short, Labour's approach fails to recognise quite how broken the UK higher education system is.

UK higher education: a broken system

At the time of the last general election in 2019, the University and College Union (UCU) was engaged in two industrial disputes with university employers. The first related to pensions, and was restricted to the older (pre-1992) universities; the second was related to pay, working conditions, pay (in)equalities and precarious working, and covered the whole of the higher education sector. The origins of the conflicts can be traced to 2018, when university employers in the pre-1992 sector apparently believed they could apply swingeing cuts to employees' pension provision, without any fear of a challenge or meaningful resistance. This action demonstrated their complete indifference to the plight of their staff, and, as the dispute has developed and extended, that indifference has been evident at every turn. Even now, more than five years later, the disputes continue, and attest to the depths to which the sector has sunk.

At the time of writing it is difficult to see how the issues will be resolved. All outcomes remain possible, from a significant breakthrough, through to a serious and debilitating setback for the union. What is clear is that, whatever the outcome, the

Soundings

dispute has served to open up to wider scrutiny all of the problems in the sector that have often been previously hidden by management strategies of underpaying staff, relying on hours of unpaid labour, and the widespread use of casualised contracts that allow staff to be picked up, or dropped, depending exclusively on the demands of the employer. This scrutiny has also made more visible the differential effects of structural inequalities on staff from backgrounds regarded as 'non-traditional' within the sector. As is often the case in industrial disputes, the headline issues that are the legal basis of the dispute reflect concerns about a much wider range of issues: it could be argued that the higher education sector strikes that have been taking place on and off since 2018 have posed a fundamental challenge to the whole basis of modern academic capitalism. This is not to argue that every UCU member on strike, or boycotting their marking, views their action as an assault on the ideological basis of the neoliberal university; but it is to assert that such sustained industrial action, waged over such a long period of time, has developed into a serious challenge to the system, with implications far beyond those of a dispute about wages and working conditions. As the dispute intensified, it was the values, cultures and practices of the modern university, as much as the material conditions experienced by university workers, that were being confronted by the organised actions of UCU members. Moreover, as the actions of union members persisted, the new managerialism in universities also became more visible. Not only did employers demonstrate a real determination to avoid addressing union concerns; a range of responses was also deployed to try to curb the actions of union members, including closing down debates in governing bodies, challenging staff over their use of social media, and restricting access to email to prevent union members being able to make contact with their colleagues. Many individual members of UCU have felt victimised in myriad ways for participating in lawful industrial action.

The new, and often not so new, managerialism in universities, the closing down of debate and the unwillingness to countenance dissent, highlight the extent to which the modern university has become a business unit driven by income generation rather than a public space in which academic freedom is encouraged first and foremost. It highlights the need for a much more radical agenda across the education sector than the prospectus that is likely to be on offer from a Labour government. What the industrial action in UK universities has demonstrated is that the system is broken, and that piecemeal fixes will not begin to tackle the fundamental problems that exist.

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

Fixing a broken system: is another university possible?

The analysis presented here suggests that Labour's higher education reforms are likely to be modest, both in scale and form. The general policy approach is a combination of political conservatism and fiscal caution, and within that wider context higher education is clearly not a high priority. There will undoubtedly be areas of improvement, but it is very unlikely that there will be serious efforts to reform the sector. Higher education policy will continue to be driven by economic imperatives (knowledge production and human capital development), and public universities will continue to be encouraged to mimic the commercial sector they are intended to service. Universities that are esteemed will be those considered entrepreneurial, dynamic and 'agile', while their entrepreneurial aspirations will be reflected in an emboldened managerialism in which performative metrics loom larger, where dissent is framed as disloyalty, and where the demarcation between academic freedom and 'reputational damage' risk is becoming increasingly blurred.

Such an assessment is undeniably bleak, and it may be that it is overly so. But what is it that might be relied on to nourish a more optimistic will, and temper this intellectual pessimism? In the concluding section of this article I want to outline the steps that I think are necessary to make a more optimistic analysis a realistic one.

Labour's electoral strategy under Starmer's leadership, as has been argued in this article, has been to make a pitch to the political centre, and even to the political right. In a world driven by electoral arithmetic, and especially in a first-past-the-post system, the tendency has been to always look to the right. Labour feels no pressure to look to its left (however loosely conceived this term may be within the current political landscape). Thus the challenge for the left, as it always has been, is to create a popular momentum capable of pulling the centre of political gravity towards it, in such a way that the Labour Party is required to tack left, and not right.

This is even more important in the context of recent strenuous efforts to marginalise the organised left within the Labour Party. The leadership sees the left as dispensable, or even as an obstacle to vote-garnering; and it thinks it can take electoral support from the left for granted, or sees them as having no impact at all. But assembling political alliances and electoral coalitions is always more complex than this. The left and the wider progressive movement remains crucial to Labour's success, both electorally and in terms of shaping and influencing the political

Soundings

consensus. In these circumstances there is therefore an even greater need to build an alliance - on education as on other issues - that is based outside of political parties, but which is capable of exerting serious influence on all those parties that can be persuaded of the need for serious higher education sectoral reform.

Such a counter-hegemonic alliance, within the HE sector as elsewhere, needs to be made up of different groupings, linked by themes, arguments and networks that connect them. It will need to form around an alternative vision of the modern university, that situates itself in contradistinction to the functional and transactional nature of contemporary higher education. It must be imaginative and inclusive enough to be able to mobilise a broad movement to support it; and it will, always, need to be actively constructed by those seeking transformative system change. It will be essential to think in the long term (looking well beyond the term of the next government), and will need to include groups with little experience of working together, finding ways to engage in collaborative thinking of a type that they have not previously undertaken. If some on the left retreat into their own version of political conservatism, the alliance that is required will not be possible.

Here I want to argue that the construction of a more optimistic alternative must emerge from, and be grounded in, the frustrations and grievances of the current system. This is what creates the impulse for change. Hence the starting point within the university sector needs to build from the conflicts described above, as the UCU disputes have sought to challenge the logics of the neoliberal university. (Links to other disputes, trade union or otherwise, with their own counter narratives, need also to be worked for.) However, any such project needs to also start from an honest and realistic assessment of some of the limitations of the UCU disputes. For example, though I argued above that the disputes posed a serious challenge to the logics of the neoliberal university, this has always been limited. For all the radicalism, the UCU disputes remained, for many, economistic struggles to improve material conditions, and failed to connect with wider concerns about the university. Many university workers remained by-standers to the disputes, while connections with students, and Student Unions, were often uneven. There can be no doubt that there were many excellent examples of student solidarity, but there was much less evidence of what might be called a mass student movement; and only limited connections were made between the struggles of staff and, for example, the campaigns around tuition fees.

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

I am not being critical of the UCU disputes here, or criticising this or that strategic decision of the union. I participated in all the action from 2018, and I understand completely why it was like it was. I am of the view that the dispute from 2018 was hugely significant, and it certainly provides the best base for building for the future. However, it is also important to acknowledge the weaknesses and limitations of what is, essentially, an industrial strategy, and to recognise the need to build outwards from the disputes in more creative and long term ways. This means making links through a wider political narrative, and to a broader constituency of people.

Central to the project I am outlining is the need to connect current grievances with alternatives that can be not only imagined, but also articulated and realised. Many campaigns of this type already exist.⁷ The challenge is to become better at connecting campaigns horizontally and sharing the enormous potential for collective learning that exists within them. If we are serious about building a counter-hegemonic movement from below then we need to take more seriously the problem of how we 'scale up'. Such a project will also require an approach that can work across the whole of the education sector, because the whole education system suffers from an oppressive managerialism and a democratic deficit that denies a voice to staff, students and communities. In many of our current educational institutions, including schools, colleges and universities, the expression of dissenting ideas is closed down and people who work in them are afraid to say what they think. There is therefore a need to connect immediate and material demands to a wider set of issues around democracy, the participation of publics and indeed questions about the purposes of public education. There is a role here for the union and individuals to publicly challenge the pronouncements on free speech made by government ministers, including in alliances with groups marginalised within the university and society more widely - for example with migrant staff and students. Educational institutions find themselves on the front line of the right's contrived culture wars, and organising around these issues is a duty that cannot be evaded.

Organising around an alternative vision of higher education, and a much more hopeful and optimistic vision of the purposes of public education, opens up the possibility of constructing a significantly broader coalition of interests that can be mobilised in support of such a project, including all those with an interest in a

Soundings

more democratic and socially just education in all its forms. This can, indeed must, connect trade unions, groups of students and learners, community groups and a diverse range of organisations across civil society.

Furthermore, it is important that an alliance organised around public education takes on board an *educative* role. By this I mean it needs to actively and intentionally help people to understand the world as it is, how it might be different, and, crucially, the role of individuals, acting collectively, in bringing about social change. (Here I am thinking back to the kind of leadership associated with Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual - someone attached to a movement or constituency who plays a key role in transforming consciousness from the standpoint of the group; but this is a form of leadership that must also be exercised at a collective level, with social movements performing the function of 'collective intellectual'.⁸) This is not about focusing on building an arithmetic coalition of the like-minded, but is about actively seeking to shift popular thinking in a way that grows the support for an alternative conception of higher education, public education generally and indeed the democratisation of public services more widely. This is the basis of what is needed for a genuinely transformative politics.

Ultimately, such an alliance needs to not only seek to influence political parties, but must integrate them organically into the project, because political parties have a key role to play in acting as a collective intellectual in the process of change I am describing. This may seem a distant prospect when considering the current Labour Party, but nothing is forever, and a transformed Labour Party, acting as a type of collective intellectual, must be central to any longer term project of transformation in society. As Michael Rustin asserted in this journal:

A progressive party needs to have an educative purpose, among its other roles. It has to offer a diagnosis of the central problems of society, and offer political solutions to these. It needs to establish a field of debate and shared understanding in which its specific policies have a large meaning.⁹

The Labour Party is currently a long way from performing this necessary role. This makes it all the more important for a popular movement to build on people's experiences to find ways to express, articulate and communicate counter narratives. When there is a political party, or indeed political parties, able to fulfil

Higher education policy and a future Labour government

this educative role - which a popular counter-hegemonic narrative can help make more likely - the prospect of reclaiming the heart and soul of the public university becomes a more realistic goal, not least because it becomes part of a broader canvas of radical reform. Until then, another university may not be probable in the lifetime of the next government, but we must believe that it is still possible in the longer term. Making that possibility real will require serious movement building within and beyond the higher education sector. The UK university disputes that began in 2018 provide the base for such a movement, and the potential election of a Labour government, for all its limitations, opens up new possibilities. What actually transpires will depend on whether those engaged in the process of transformation can construct the necessary alliances that compel a Labour government to look left. It is an easy aspiration to articulate in the abstract, but much more difficult to build in reality.

Howard Stevenson is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Nottingham, and President, University of Nottingham, University and College Union branch.

Notes

1. 'Keir Starmer says "Labour has changed" in charm offensive to business chiefs', *Daily Mirror*, 22 November 2022: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-says-labour-changed-28556615>.
2. *It's time for real change: The Labour Party manifesto*, Labour Party 2019: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf>.
3. *5 missions for a better Britain*, Labour Party 2023: <https://labour.org.uk/missions/>; *5 missions for a better Britain: Breaking down the barriers to opportunity [briefing document]*, Labour Party 2023: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>.
4. 'Our focus will be on reform', Bridget Phillipson's speech on childcare, Labourlist, 9 March 2023: <https://labourlist.org/2023/03/our-focus-will-be-on-reform-bridget-phillipsons-speech-on-childcare/>.
5. Keir Starmer, *My pledges to you*: <https://keirstarmer.com/plans/10-pledges/>.
6. 'Labour's top team pushes Starmer to replace tuition fees with a graduate tax', *Guardian*, 21 May 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/may/21/labours-top-team-pushes-starmer-to-replace-tuition-fees-with-graduate-tax>.
7. See, for example, the campaigns at Kings College on childcare and democracy, discussed by John Narayan and Lucia Pradella in this issue; and the hallways of

Soundings

learning initiative discussed by Fatema Khatun and colleagues, also in this issue.

8. Howard Stevenson, *Educational Leadership and Antonio Gramsci: The Organising of Ideas*, London, Routledge 2024.

9. Michael Rustin, 'The long revolution: Why the left needs a strategic and long-term perspective', *Soundings* 77, spring 2021, pp121-134, p129.