

Warwick University Ltd 40 years on

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It's disheartening to read E.P. Thompson's *Warwick University Ltd* in 2014 and find that not only is it still depressingly, crushingly relevant – but that it ultimately became a virtual blueprint for the future direction of this University. Over the course of the last decade we've seen Warwick undergo a series of seismic shifts – and it's hard not to see the introduction of tuition fees as the tipping point.

Of course, it's easy to hark back to those halcyon days when you could study without worrying too much about the financial implications, and afternoons could be easily frittered away in the Union bar putting the world to rights over several pints or spent farting around in a field in the name of 'art'. Equally, it's easy to view our own student years through rose-tinted spectacles, even if they've only just passed. But there has been a definite and noticeable change in atmosphere here at Warwick over the past few years, to the point where the campus actually now feels different.

It's difficult to put your finger on precisely what that change is – call it something in the air. But the fundamental shift in attitude among students is noticeable. University used to be about so much more than just obtaining a degree. It was about discovering yourself, having fun, being exposed to new things, being challenged, developing yourself and formulating your own worldview. More importantly, it used to be about opening oneself up to new ideas and experiences, rather than closing yourself off to them.

However, the University system students are currently presented with seems like little more than an endless, ongoing

treadmill – a series of hoops to jump through, with society events to plan, internships to complete, and ‘experiences’ to log until they finally reach their Mecca: the land of milk and honey that is the hallowed ‘graduate job’. As young people, we constantly hear about being granted honorary membership of ‘Generation Screwed’, and as such are destined to bear the brunt of contracting economic circumstances and impending ecological disasters wrought by the sins of preceding generations. If, as we’re told, graduate jobs are so scarce and actual careers are like gold-dust, why would we not keep on the straight and narrow until we achieve what we’ve been told repeatedly since the age of 11 that we should ultimately want? Who could blame us for getting our heads down and simply following the path we’ve been placed on?

The problem with this assembly-line model is that we run the risk of becoming unquestioning automatons who are vapid, unprincipled and characterless. With debt piling up, 2:1s to bag, and so-called ‘skills’ to develop, what room is there left for dissent, criticism or independent thought? It is all too easy to become identikit students, developing identikit skills in a bid to secure identikit jobs. Take a step out of line, jump off the graduate treadmill, attempt to open up a dialogue outside of the sanitised and approved channels of surveys and focus groups, and suddenly you’ve become marked as a dangerous or even subversive element for straying from what’s been prescribed as the ‘correct’ path.

The hike in tuition fees and the ongoing marketisation of Higher Education have contributed immeasurably to this shift. Clearly, to reiterate that familiar truism, they have fundamentally altered the relationship between students and their teachers. They have made students consumers, and Universities simply service providers. They have made the interchange between tutor and student an economic transaction rather than a free and collaborative exchange of ideas. They have monetised and even closed off what should be a fundamental tenet of a healthy, democratic and functioning society: the altruistic notion of education for all.

In terms of helping to ring-fence basic dissent, however, £9k fees have to be the greatest invention since the Police Kettle Line. What better way to reduce the chances of an individual speaking out against some wider injustice than to be able to point – every single time – to how it directly affects you right here, right now?

Is it any surprise, then, that we’ve started seeing the rise of students quantifying their education by cost per hour – asking publicly what a given seminar, lecture or office hour is worth? Within Warwick Students’ Union, a recent officer candidate ran on a manifesto that promised to calculate a

‘Degree Receipt’ for each student, outlining exactly where their £9k tuition fees were spent. The rhetoric of ‘value for money’, of service-provider and consumer, of ‘customer satisfaction’ is writ large – and, worse still, it is apparently now considered a potential vote-winner for a role in the very institution that should be openly and vociferously criticising the rise of the austerity university and all that it stands for.

As a result of this, we’ve seen the meteoric rise of what is regularly described as the ‘ordinary student’, an anonymous cipher whose interests (and, more importantly, fees) need defending at the cost of ... well, it seems at the cost of anyone or anything which might get in the way. If students are consumers, handing over all that cash, then their ‘experience’ simply has to trump all – after all, isn’t the customer always right? Yet, the spectre of the ‘ordinary student’ is too easily employed by those who seek to entrench the inequalities and the injustices of the austerity university – and we have seen no more telling example of this than the recent fiasco that was ‘Warwick Student Lectures’.

Under the guise of selfless crusaders fighting for the good of all students, earlier this year a group of undergraduates in the History Department at Warwick mounted a series of ersatz lectures during industrial action – the rationale being that ‘the idea we should work independently is an insult to our choice to study at Warwick and to pay substantial fees’. They claimed (dubiously, in some instances) that this action was not political – when criticised, the organisers were quick to point out that their objective was not ‘ideological’, but simply sought to address the ‘concerns of students’ who would be missing lectures as a result of staff strikes.

Noble intentions, one might think – and on any other occasion, students might be applauded for taking the initiative to add to their education through independent learning. But not during industrial action. Not when teaching staff are undervalued, and not when fellow students who teach alongside their own postgraduate studies are being asked to work for equivalent to less than the minimum wage. At a democratic meeting this year, Warwick’s Sabbatical Officers were asked by one of the lecture organisers whether any members of the team would be ‘bold enough’ to applaud them for their actions. As sitting Postgraduate Officer, Lucy Gill replied by saying that for students of history, the group showed a remarkable inability to analyse either historical precedents or the pressing weight of current social context. Either they had no conception of the impact of their actions, or simply didn’t care – however, to her mind, neither was an acceptable position to occupy given the circumstances.

Presumably the overwhelming applause received from the hundreds of supposedly ‘ordinary’ students in attendance – together with the widespread condemnation the group received when their exploits eventually received national press coverage – was not quite the reaction the enquirer was hoping for.

What a useful tool, then, the so-called ‘student experience’ has become, and what an equally convenient rallying cry for the protection of ‘our experience’ that a cancelled lecture or seminar can now be quantified as fifty, sixty, seventy pounds’ worth of fees, a further step back from that 2:1, or another hurdle in the way of that sacred internship. The issue becomes personal, and the impact immediate – the victim is the student, their pocket and their customer experience, not the member of staff being asked to work far beyond the hours paid for, struggling to carve out a space in an increasingly casualised and marketised academy. Once tutors become mere service-providers, they very quickly stop being people, and that leaves the road open for students to defend their own individual interests, rather than those of the collective. To this end, if students are constantly told that they should judge their contact time by minutes and hours, their feedback by boxes ticked, and their extracurricular activities in terms of CV points, it is it any surprise that quality of interaction, encouragement of free and critical thinking, human connection, and even the desire to indulge in sheer youthful fun go quickly out of the window?

This is part of a much wider problem in society today, one which frequently reduces human beings – actual human beings with emotions, feelings, connections and real lives – to impersonal statistics. To become useful to society, we must no longer be people; we are seen simply as ‘Drivers of Economic Growth’. But in becoming so in thrall to the perceived God of capital – in focusing solely on present expediency and short-term gain – we have lost sight of our ability to connect the dots and see the overall picture. We will therefore attempt now to connect what are two seemingly disparate symptoms of the neo-liberal university’s operating principles in a bid to illustrate just how desperate a cycle – and how much of a self-fulfilling prophecy – these strands are rapidly becoming. The first of these is the issue of university funding and policy.

In recent months, universities up and down the country have been engaged in a frenzy of activity in an effort to ensure a favourable report from their students in the National Student Survey. Slides are presented to students and articles written for campus newspapers detailing improvements to teaching and services made in response to student feedback; survey responses are solicited via emails and phone calls; course

reps, societies and clubs are asked to encourage undergraduates to take part; and participants are offered the chance to win book tokens, printer credits, Amazon vouchers, iPads and Kindles. On Warwick campus, students have been recruited as departmental champions to encourage their cohorts to respond, targeted news stories have been widely publicised, and £5 food vouchers have been issued to all respondents in an effort to drive up response rates (and, it's hoped, overall scores).

Why all the effort? Certainly, the Higher Education sector as a whole is talking a good game about commitment to the 'student experience', and millions of pounds are being ploughed into capital expenditure to enhance 'student satisfaction' across the country. But beneath this laudable attention sits the crux of the issue: improving life for students is actually the least of the National Student Survey's uses. Increasingly, it's about league-table placings, and how these placings equate with better access to financial resources.

The removal of public funding and the introduction of students as consumers has – as neo-liberal economics is wont to do – left the university in a race for funding and market share, and the National Student Survey is just one more route to that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Those survey results are vital to the distinctions that ensure inequalities across the sector – witness the emergence of so-called 'world class' institutions in the form of the self-appointed 'Russell Group', where new élites stake their claim upon more and better resources, thereby further weakening and undermining the Higher Education sector as a whole.

As such, current students simply become fodder for league-table statistics – we're force-fed details of improvements that have been made in our name, become enlisted in sanitised feedback processes, and are then spat out at the other end, our voices supposedly having been heard but our usefulness as a resource now thoroughly drained. We become home-grown marketing tools whose apparent 'satisfaction' is used not to act as the foundation for further improvements, but to draw in successors with promises of a vibrant student life, more contact hours, and strong 'employability'.

If students are told repeatedly that graduate employers care so much about league-table rankings, that their degree is nothing but a three or four-year job interview, or that their self-worth rests on how successfully they can sell themselves in terms of 'Brand You', is it any surprise that students respond to these surveys precisely as they are asked to do: by lauding the positives of the neo-liberal university in return for a higher profile with employers and a better chance of fighting off the competition?

In turn, the incentive for Universities to invest in their teaching facilities and staff (in the form of fair pay and conditions) slowly ebbs away. Those league-table spots aren't going to be won by encouraging excellent teaching – for, God forbid, this might actually raise student expectations – or by ensuring that graduate teaching assistants can earn more than equivalent to the minimum wage. League-table spots, and those valuable percentage-point increases in satisfaction, are won by ploughing cash into marketing gimmicks and quick wins – by sacrificing anything that suggests a degree may be anything more than a passive route into a graduate job and, above all, by empowering the notion of student as consumer.

Warwick University's mission statement drips with buzzwords redolent of the dogmas and mantras of a deeply-entrenched capitalist ideology. Innovation, entrepreneurship and links to industry dominate – it's what, apparently, makes us 'relevant to society'. Increasingly, we are being told that our only value as human beings is what we can contribute economically and materially, rather than intellectually, creatively or even spiritually. You only have to take a walk around campus to see these values writ large in bricks and mortar on our landscape – constant redevelopment leaves the Business School and Manufacturing Group in glossy new buildings while the Humanities and Social Sciences gather dust. It's telling that departments such as American Studies, Theatre Studies and Film are repeatedly rated among the finest in the country, yet they seem all but invisible on campus. Clearly, academic excellence matters only when tied to a business plan; creativity, innovation and study of the Humanities matter only when they can be tagged to points on our CVs. However, all that glitters is not gold. Whether we like it or not, we have become what our student predecessors fought so strongly to prevent – Warwick University Ltd has conquered all.

The language of neo-liberalism and rampant capitalism imbues the University's upcoming strategy, too. Our graduates are valued for the 'impact they have made in the sectors they join'; the University's worth in the community is to be judged by 'our championing of economic growth', and we collaborate solely to further 'our collective economic impact'. Even the Arts Centre apparently needs to add 'competitive edge' to our regional arts provision. Do we have no other values by which to judge ourselves?

It is all too easy for those in senior managerial positions to wax lyrical about how present circumstances irrevocably dictate our course as an institution, as if they themselves are merely passive agents swept along by

the tide and play no actual role in formulating it. Vice-Chancellors' endless deferment to so-called independent 'Remuneration Committees' on the issue of their rapidly spiralling compensation is a particularly galling example of this, but it's also implicit in our own V-C's recent proclamation on the thousands of pounds required to travel overseas to study at our partner institution, Monash University in Australia, that students are 'just going to have to do it because that's the way the world's going'. Now, this may be easily accomplished by someone commanding a six-figure salary and able to claim back the flight, health-care and accommodation costs as expenses. But, between endless trips back and forth to Monash, the V-C seems to have mislaid his conscience, common sense and even conception of basic social inequality somewhere down the back of a Qantas Business Class seat.

Indeed, with the rise and increasing dominance of corporate-centred departments at Warwick such as the Business School and Manufacturing Group, so too have we seen the decline of basic community, interaction and, arguably, even empathy at our university. There is an increasingly insular, hostile and suffocating atmosphere on campus at Warwick – that 'something in the air' referred to earlier. Just as the cut-throat worlds of business and industry require blind adherence and ruthlessness of their subscribers, from the moment students enter University, they become locked in a battle with those around them – for if, as we're told, the job market is poor and opportunities scarce, what is there to do but compete against your course-mates and peers for that opportunity, internship or extracurricular activity that we can then sell over and over again on an application form?

The very essence of capitalism is competition – for us to flourish, for us to grow, someone else must lose out. But rarely is the question asked: who are the victims of this ideology? What are the consequences of our actions, and what is their cumulative impact?

We move now to the knock-on effects these symptoms have on expectations, teaching and pay. Already we've started to see what competition has done to teaching at our university. The withdrawal of government funding and the shift to a market-based Higher Education sector has left universities little more than bloodhounds of enterprise, rabidly sniffing out every last vestige of market share. As further cuts loom, universities are driven to build up budget surpluses by jacking up postgraduate fees in perceived line with 'prestige' market rates, all the while treating students from overseas as cash cows to be milked appropriately. The final nail in the coffin is limiting – or, in some cases,

even contributing to the suppression of – pay.

In order to keep the lid on staff wages, a large proportion of teaching work has been passed to graduate students and post-doctorates on ‘training’ contracts or teaching bursaries. At Warwick, up to 50 per cent of teaching in some departments is undertaken by graduate teaching assistants, and even more by hourly-paid post-doctoral staff. Yet, many of these teaching staff remain uncontracted, lack a basic job description, and work far more hours than they are ultimately paid for when additional preparation, marking-time and office-hours are factored in.

Worse still, the massive inequalities of wealth that exist between departments has created a system in which even teaching salaries are now operating according to the laws of free-market economics. Though there exists a ‘Warwick standard’ base-line of pay, the reality is that when additional duties are included, postgraduate teachers in ‘cash-rich’ departments often make up to five times what others do, regardless of the respective workloads. But pressure on pay is limited by the high turnover of staff and their precarious situation, since nothing is more convenient for an employer than a flimsy, 9-month, zero-hours contract. In this and the increasing institutional favouritism exhibited towards the biggest money-spinning departments, Warwick University’s message seems fairly clear: the value of knowledge in certain areas is far greater than it is in others.

Nothing makes such grotesque inequity more palatable to observers than the suggestion that these students are ‘doing what they love’ by teaching for a pittance, or that they ‘should value the experience’, as if poor pay and exploitation are gifts dispensed from on high by a benevolent department solely for the good of the tutor indentured. After all, nothing keeps you toeing the line like crippling job insecurity? But casualisation, whether trussed up in the values of vocational gain or not, does nothing for those caught in its slippery net.

Striking staff this year have been told repeatedly that there simply ‘isn’t the money’ available for a pay-rise in line with basic inflation, having essentially suffered a real-terms pay-cut of 13 per cent over the last five years. This may be true when all prospective capital expenditure is accounted for. But when you look at the University’s current surplus of £19m and the ways that money is being invested at Warwick – £100k on a new entrance for Warwick Manufacturing Group, a £16k pay-rise for the Vice-Chancellor, £200k on the proposed Monash brand launch, with £6m due to be invested in this initiative over the next two years – it is exasperating beyond belief to be repeatedly told that the University does not have the funds to invest in what is, after all, its primary purpose:

teaching and learning right here at Warwick.

The University's next prospective conquest in its endless quest for global expansionism is office space in that most strident glass phallus, The Shard in London. But between this and Warwick's other domestic and overseas land-grabs, no one seems to have bothered to ask: what is the point of gaining the world while losing your soul? Instead of pursuing lofty territorial ventures and managerial vanity projects, we should be focusing on fixing the many problems on our doorstep – the first of which should be prioritising a much fairer system of compensation for our increasingly stretched academic staff.

This isn't happening. Instead, for all our largesse and bravado about becoming a 'global force' in Higher Education, Warwick is a sinking ship. Over the last decade, we have fallen steadily into the lower end of the league-table Top 10, and that's a trend which looks set to continue still further over the coming years. With Warwick's status on a seemingly irrevocable slide, the Vice-Chancellor increasingly seems like Captain Smith on the Titanic, blithely ignoring the repeated ice-warnings of impending financial and reputational ruin, but ploughing ahead regardless of the consequences.

Meanwhile, the band plays on, as staff and students alike are reduced to nothing but cost-codes on a university balance sheet. Figures in; figures out – income to be increased, costs to be minimised. But we're not figures, are we? We're people. And we seem to have forgotten what that means: principally, a modicum of basic empathy and respect for others. Without student support for industrial action, staff stand alone, and alone they can be broken – as was shown by what felt suspiciously like a forced capitulation to a 2% pay increase in the face of universities refusing to pay staff at all in the event of a marking boycott. Nothing, then, will stand in the way of universities driving down wages and, in turn, teaching standards.

Where does this race to the bottom end, and what will be the ultimate cost – if not for students personally right now, then for our own families in the future? Lecturers were the first to defend students' interests when tuition fees were introduced, and look at how we now reward them: by selfishly criticising their actions when they mount industrial action to defend their livelihoods, and even then deigning to do their jobs for them by holding replacement lectures. What a way to say 'thank you'.

Evidently, universities cannot exist without funding, and that funding has to come from somewhere. The days of free education are clearly long gone (dismantled, incidentally, by the very people who reaped the initial benefits of such provision), and so it looks like tuition fees are here to stay.

But that doesn't mean that students shouldn't keep pushing universities not to simply roll over and die on what ought to be their core reasons for being. As an academic institution, we should at least be attempting to resist or push against the status quo rather than accepting it, placating it, or, in some instances, actively encouraging it. We are an institute of higher education, not a graduate conveyor belt for corporations or industry. We should be idealistic. We should be striving to remain the last oasis of thought and integrity in the barren wilderness of capitalism.

This institution, Warwick University Ltd, is doing no such thing, and its sickness is becoming contagious. Under the current system, industrial action very quickly becomes an attack on the 'ordinary' individual student, and not about establishing what the fundamental values of our university should be. By appropriating the voices of those 'ordinary students', the political right are able to play to our worst human instincts of insularity and selfishness – we hand over the money, and thus our 'rights' should be protected.

Meanwhile, those who stand against this, who try to articulate why the fight for fair pay is important and why staff and students should stand together on the issue – those who question why our education system fundamentally devalues its staff, fails to resource teaching adequately, and, rather than taking learning as its reason for being, has sold its soul to the gods of Branding, Global Expansion and Entrepreneurialism – well, they're simply dismissed as the 'shouty political minority'; as blind ideologues with no connection to 'what the ordinary student wants'. Indeed, for daring to question the motivations of the Warwick Student Lectures group earlier this year, Lucy Gill was described as embodying 'the problem with the student left' for apparently raising a political issue where one didn't exist. But, as the British rock group Skunk Anansie once said, 'Yes, it's fucking political; everything's political.'

Make no mistake – education is political. Fees are political, pay is political, filling out the National Student Survey is political. As some of the best and brightest that this country has to offer, I'd hope that we take the time to understand and question a narrative which tells us that our tutors need to take the hit for 'austerity' whilst senior management continue to jet around the globe on the money we pay to receive our education, but we're told just 'isn't there' for other vital purposes.

Instead, where is the ordinary student in all of this? Probably on an internship, networking away, or planning some form of sponsored 'summit', boosting that CV with industry-approved tasks and skills – and never once bothering to stop and think about the wider issues at stake, standing up for others, or defending the values which ought to be the

immovable bedrock of our society. But if we're not brave enough to shake things up right here on our little campus in the West Midlands, how will we ever step up to the challenges presented by the big wide world – particularly given the massive upheavals likely to be thrown up in coming decades by issues such as global warming, an ageing population, and declining global resources?

Students at Warwick may live in what's known as 'The Bubble', but that does not mean they should exist in a vacuum. We need to start looking beyond ourselves, lest we simply become the 'Me, Me, Me' generation, perpetually preening in selfies, demanding our slice of the pie, while letting ourselves become slaves to the all-consuming God of money. As the internet generation, we're used to things being at our fingertips – the latest news, sport, gossip, gadgets or ideas now and quickly. If it's not immediate, we don't care – and that's precisely how the neo-liberal university has us all locked into a cycle of self-interest which allows little wriggle-room for independent thought or critical assessment of the broader issues at play.

Ultimately, then, we now have a duty as students to ask ourselves: what is the price of this blind adherence to the consumer principle, both for our society and our sense of the greater good? Does paying £9k a year entitle us to turn a blind eye to wider social issues? If so, then we've sold ourselves very cheap indeed.