

# Book Review: The Question of Conscience: Higher Education and Personal Responsibility by David Watson

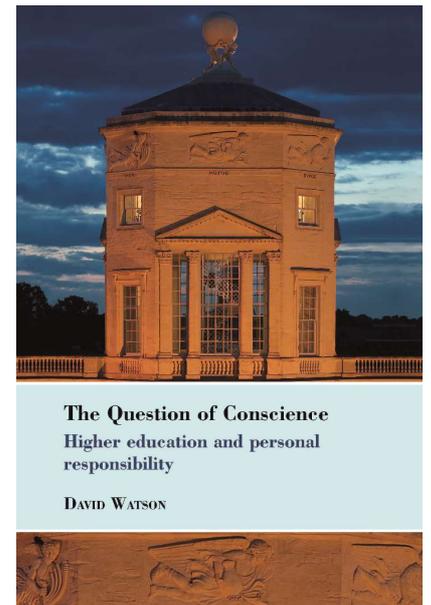
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*Does a university education hold any value? How do universities determine what skills are relevant in today's ever-changing world when information could become outdated even before students graduate? These are some of the questions and problems that **David Watson** sets out to explore in this book. **Ignas Kalpokas** finds this a timely work that clearly dissects the current condition of HE and provides a rewarding read for those actively involved in the sector.*



**The Question of Conscience: Higher Education and Personal Responsibility. David Watson. Institute of Education Press. December 2013.**

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Few people would disagree that the Higher Education (HE) sector is at a crossroads. Among the many challenges facing it are those posed by technology, the labour market, funding models, and sometimes even the lack of a clearly defined purpose. [David Watson's](#) *The Question of Conscience* is an ambitious albeit very concise study of the challenges and the possible ways to address them. It is also a study of the university from within, written by a person who has spent many years in the trade of running a university – something that primarily historical, sociological or other accounts of HE cannot offer. And yet, despite the author being an insider, this is also a very self-conscious and often even self-critical account of the university. Thus, besides being a treasure trove of information about how the HE sector works and what its moral, social, and political underpinnings are, the book can also be read from a methodological perspective: as an example of thinking which is both inside and outside, both very intimate and simultaneously conveyed as if through an outsider's gaze.

The book runs to seven chapters, and opens with a historical overview of the university's development as an institution but also as a phenomenon because the university was never just an educational institution – it has always had an added value and aspiration. How these additional connotations changed throughout the years is an interesting topic in itself but it also has an additional purpose: it shows the adaptability of the university. Whenever this institution has been at a crossroads, it has found a way to keep its presence and relevance. This should, the argument goes, serve as an inspiration for the modern HE sector: whatever the challenges, there is always a way of overcoming them.

Even more significantly, the book also deals with the various theories of HE, each of which prescribes its own purposes to the university, and analyses them against the current trends in the HE sector. The picture that emerges is a very paradoxical one indeed. The university has long been seen as an institution which moulds good individuals. The model of a 'good' individual used to be known in advance and usually defined in religious (although sometimes also in civic) terms and universities were to uphold such uniformity. However, this practice is difficult to imagine in an increasingly multicultural and multi-religious HE, which appears to be devoid of ultimate ideals of the good. Also, what about preparation for public life? This could be one of the functions of the university but it also opens a Pandora's Box of problems, especially those regarding the relation with

power, both political and economic. Indeed, the question of who sets the norms and how autonomous the university can be become topical once HE immerses itself in deliberate moulding of any kind.



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Alternatively, the university could be an institution which fosters certain personal qualities and attributes that are necessary for future life and career. Studying at a university is then seen as a rite of passage, a final stepping stone on the path to adulthood, offering a mixture of essential knowledge, independent life, and socialisation. And yet, ample empirical evidence calls such views into question. In a similar vein, university has been, and still is, seen as a means to acquire skills and knowledge thus serving as a gateway to a chosen profession. This view could have been easily applicable when HE institutions could initiate young people into a stable canon of knowledge and values of a certain professional practice. Conversely, the modern university struggles with the questions of how to determine what skills are relevant in today's ever-changing world, how to keep up when information could become outdated even before the students graduate, and how to balance market demands, student demands, and the demands of professional bodies or employers.

Questions about the value of university education also cannot be avoided. Therefore, the author sets out to enquire whether degree is really an advantage and how such advantage could be quantifiable or established with certainty. A closely related dilemma relates to the university's role in social mobility in the age of mass higher education: is the university at the forefront of levelling opportunities and allowing people to strive for more than could otherwise be possible or is it really entrenching the present divisions and inhibiting mobility, keeping in mind that graduates of some universities are seen as more equal than others. As always, the picture is unequivocal.

The above is just a few of the problems and dilemmas that are skilfully dealt with in the book. And yet, *The Question of Conscience* is not only a descriptive but also a normative endeavour; it is not only an analysis but also a manifesto. This becomes evident in the last two chapters of the book. The penultimate chapter deals with the 'terms and conditions' of membership in modern HE, aiming to establish the rules of conduct for all who partake in universities, from students to staff, and addressing many of the uncertainties facing the sector. The last chapter, meanwhile, aims to construct the author's own theory of HE as shared responsibility but does so by way of a conceptual pick and mix takeaway combining bits of Arendt with bits of Rawls and many things in-between. It is this kaleidoscope of ideas and approaches that leaves the reader dazzled and slightly unconvinced by the entire argument, rendering the analytical part of the book significantly more impacting than the normative one.

All in all, *The Question of Conscience* is a timely work that clearly dissects the current condition of HE and provides a rewarding read for both those actively involved in the sector and those with only a general interest (although novices may not always find the style extremely accessible). As such, it is a highly recommended work.

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**Ignas Kalpokas** is a PhD student in Politics at the University of Nottingham, working on a dissertation on Baruch Spinoza, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Schmitt. He holds his Masters degree in Social and Political Critical Theory and Bachelors degree in Politics from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania). He has also worked on various educational projects and initiatives. Ignas' research interests lie in the investigation of interrelated concepts of sovereignty, the state, and the political as well as the formation and maintenance of (national) identities. In addition, his research also involves history, literature, and international relations theory. His preferred theoretical framework is mostly Continental philosophy. [Read more reviews by Ignas.](#)