

Book Review: Reshaping the University: the Rise of the Regulated Market in Higher Education by David Palfreyman and Ted Tapper

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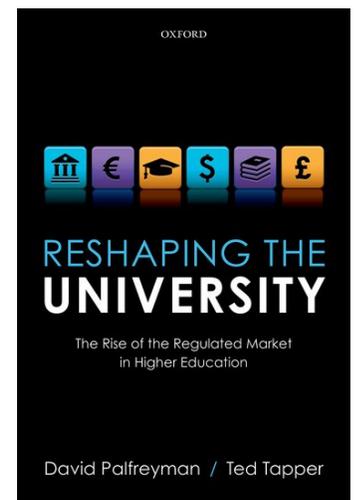
2014-11-17

*This book focuses on the policy of removing almost entirely public support for the payment of student fees. Although it goes into great detail regarding the emergence of the regulated market as a way of delivering higher education to growing numbers, it does so with little apparent appreciation for what that emergence has required within the universities and in the daily lives of their academics and administrators, finds **Ron Johnston**.*

Reshaping the University: the Rise of the Regulated Market in Higher Education.
David Palfreyman and Ted Tapper. Oxford University Press. 2014.

Find this book:  

I applied to three universities in autumn 1958 (having already obtained three A-levels); I got a handwritten offer from the head of the relevant department at one of them within a week – and accepted it. The education I received over the next three years was competently-delivered but rarely inspiring (much like the previous eight years at one of my home town's two grammar schools), and certainly not demanding. We had only five timetabled contact hours in the final year and, literally, read for our degrees (or probably, in some cases, didn't: of the 48 students in the first year of the honours degree 12 were relegated to the pass degree after the year-end examinations, as were a further 9 a year later!); two of the seven papers in the final exams could not be revised for.



It is all so different now: in one university, departments have recently been told that staff should not recommend that students buy books and that 'Reading and Skills Weeks' should not be termed 'Enrichment Weeks'. But such aspects of how university life has been restructured – along with many others, such as the nature of an academic career – are, at best, only hinted at in [Palfreyman](#) and [Tapper](#)'s detailed, occasionally repetitive and in places tedious, discussion of their chosen subject matter – *The Rise of the Regulated Market in Higher Education*. Even within that restricted canvass their focus is almost entirely on England – given the separate funding systems that have been introduced in Scotland and Wales post-devolution (Northern Ireland is ignored) – although US experience is drawn upon in some of the discussions, notably of for-profit degree providers.

The book's key message – you can't miss it, so often is it stressed – is that English higher education (which extends well beyond the institutions with the title university, although they get the bulk of the coverage) has been changed, by a combination of government decree, pressure and 'nudge'. Fifty years ago the university sector was a small-scale operation to which the Treasury allocated funds through what would now be termed a quango (the UGC), which had advised the government how much was needed and what for; it then distributed the money – on a quinquennial cycle – to the autonomous institutions to spend more or less as they wished (with some constraints). Over the last three decades, a regulated market has been created, with an increasing portion of the money, covering the universities' major activity – teaching – coming from the students, most of whom now (eventually; possibly?) pay the full cost of their undergraduate education through income-contingent government loans. Or at least some of the students: Palfreyman and Tapper concentrate almost entirely on undergraduates, very largely ignoring the substantial numbers (many from overseas) on taught postgraduate courses and undertaking research degrees (currently some 22 per cent of the total enrolment) for which the market is very largely unregulated.



Auckland student protest 16.10.97. Credit: [SocialistWorkerNZ](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The book's core theme is pursued through four main sections – 'British Higher Education as a System: Shifting Perceptions, Changing Realities' (three chapters); 'The Pressures for Change: Internal and External' (five chapters); 'Responding to Change: Organizational Fragmentation' (three chapters); and 'Towards the Free Market: English Higher Education 2020' (one chapter, more of which is about the past than the future). It recounts the pressures for change (almost entirely financial plus the desire for universities to make a greater contribution to the country's 'economic development'), various government proposals and actions (including major commissioned reports, such as those chaired by Sir Ron Dearing and Lord Browne), and the universities' responses – collective more than individual. The coverage, within the book's own parameters, is not comprehensive, however, although parts are very detailed and *Reshaping the University* will be a standard reference for that material. (There is no discussion, for example, of the UFC's attempt to introduce a market in 1990 when universities were required to bid for expansion in student numbers against 'guide prices'.)

Palfreyman and Tapper provide many useful insights into a complex, complicated story – there has never been an overall strategy for UK higher education, merely a continuing sequence of pragmatic responses to events and financial pressures. For those interested in likely future changes, some parts, such as the chapter on 'the entry of the non-profits', are particularly illuminating. But this is not a disinterested history; the authors' own value judgments are frequently paraded, sometimes in considerable (as in their dissection of the positions recently taken up by the Committee for the Defence of British Universities). In general, they appear to approve of the move to the regulated market, with students as consumers, but when one university (Bristol) responded to the 2012 market changes (take as many students as you wish if they have grades AAB or better at A-level) they accuse it of 'gorging' on the additional income! Similarly, universities are criticised for the 'scandal' that some still give staff sabbaticals although it is 'difficult to show [they] are research-productive' (no, it isn't!), as well as for pursuing global rankings 'based almost entirely on research output' (again, not the case with many of those – admittedly flawed – league tables based at least partly on indicators that focus on the student experience). They claim that it is 'pretty nigh impossible for any university to demonstrate that the academic labour content in the delivery of the teaching for most undergraduate degree courses exceeds, say, half of the average fee' and of that fee 'so little at almost all HEIs is actually spent on the direct provision of undergraduate teaching' – when their own university (Oxford) currently claims that the average cost of providing an undergraduate education is £16,000 but the maximum fee is only £9,000, requiring subsidies in the opposite direction to Palfreyman and Tapper's claims that undergraduates are subsidising research!

These attacks on what the authors clearly identify as inefficient institutions take no account of the changes that have happened within them over recent decades. The average quality and quantity of the undergraduate teaching is much improved from that of students who experienced 'take it or leave it' offerings (albeit for free) as little as two-three decades ago, alongside which there has been an exponential growth in research productivity. The student experience has changed markedly and so has the life of the academics who structure and deliver it – for relatively low pay in most cases and now threatened with a very significant reduction in their pensions. The nature of the regulated market puts added pressure on them as administrators, involved in interminable form-filling and monitoring – in which they have been joined by armies of professional form-filling administrators (deteriorating student:(academic)staff ratios are frequently discussed, but has anybody every shown a trend line for student: (administrative) staff ratios?). An increasing proportion of the universities' income goes on such people and activity, and less on the roles for which they exist – storing, disseminating and advancing knowledge. To cater for such shifts in expenditure, many universities have undertaken frequent – time-consuming and academically hard-to-justify – internal restructurings.

Reshaping the University is thus a partial book – in every sense of that term. Although it goes into great detail regarding the emergence of the regulated market as a way of delivering higher education to growing numbers, it does so with little apparent appreciation for what that emergence has required within the universities and in the daily lives of their academics and administrators. Those involved in universities' higher managerial ranks might recognise much of the material as a picture of the emerging world they have to deal with; the vast majority of their academic staff will not since Palfreyman and Tapper seem dissociated from what they do, under increasing pressure and for declining relative rewards.

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