

Talking Tertiary

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Introduction

In this edited interview, we use this moment of change in our Scottish higher education landscape to reflect back on how we might have come towards this ‘tertiary’ move as a sector to help us look forward and think carefully about the challenges and opportunities that may lie ahead. Our two interviewees have been significant voices in Quality Enhancement in Scotland and we anticipate that their insights and perspectives will give us food for thought as we cross the threshold into a new era.

Lorraine Anderson (LA) has over 30 years’ experience working in higher education, originally in researching and teaching modern history but latterly in educational development, working in teacher education both in the university and the college sector, and also in quality enhancement across the UK and Ireland. Between 2014 and 2017, she worked with Roni Bamber as the Deputy Chair of the Enhancement Theme Leaders Group, looking at student transitions.

Roni Bamber (RB) is Professor Emerita of higher education at Queen Margaret University, where she was Director of the Centre for Academic Practice. The first 20 years of her professional career were spent in higher education as a Spanish lecturer and then for the next 20 years she was head of educational development in two different universities, and worked both in England and Scotland.

Sisyphus: What are the perennial challenges facing a tertiary sector?

This section explores the specific challenges that the sector faces, thinking explicitly about the unresolved and lingering issues that pervade.

RB: The first one is resources and that has never been any different and it never will be any different. Although it does seem to be exacerbating.

The second big challenge for the sector is that of participation. And, like many of my generation, I was the first person in the family to go to university. That has been really important and meaningful for me, and we've made great progress, but we're still a long way off reaching a positive conclusion on participation.

And then the third one, which I think is definitely becoming far more challenging as I look into the future, is technology. Many of us have worked with technology and try to keep abreast of it; but now it sometimes feels a bit like the horse has run away with the cart, and it feels like a very different kind of challenge.

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LA: I think the first one for me, was the constant - and it still exists despite efforts to try to address it - undervaluing of teaching and teachers in the university sector, and in the college sector as well, I think, but perhaps more in the university sector because of the strength of research in the majority of institutions. Despite all the efforts to try and address that balance, it hasn't worked. And that creates a further danger for colleges coming into a sector that favours research rather than teaching.

My second challenge is a lack of what I call 'a seat at the table' for educational developers and those of us who want to promote teaching and teaching development. I think all three of us, having been involved in, for example, the Scottish Higher Education Developers (SHED) network will recognise this. I'll acknowledge that over time our profile increased but when it came down to it, it didn't have the impact it should have had. That lack of inclusion for us as colleagues and as a community is a real challenge, and I think that drawing in other colleagues from the college sector will prove exceptionally difficult for them.

I'm on to my third challenge now – the reinvention of the wheel and a failure to really learn from and build on what we've done before.

RB: I think most things have good sides to them, Lorraine. So the first one, I wonder if, and it hadn't occurred to me before, but listening to you, I'm wondering if the arrival of what is the college sector into this tertiary domain, might mean that teaching gets a bit more attention because we have a sector that has been teaching-oriented rather than research-oriented. As there has been no premium there for research I would have thought so. Could that help? And that's one comment.

And the other one is about the 'seat at the table' and to some extent I agree with you. On the other hand, I think the enhancement-led approach has given us that seat at the table.

LA: That's a very fair comment. I think the work that we all did as part of the Enhancement Themes, and that still continues, was terrific work, with some really great ideas, and really great involvement of colleagues. But I think I would challenge you and say, yes, we had a seat at the table, but it was a different table. It was a table that was laid out for that purpose rather than being 'the' table; but it helps, it does help.

Defining tertiary

Before we consider what our tertiary sector might look like with its challenges and opportunities, it is helpful to have a shared understanding of what the term means in our current context. In this section, both Lorraine and Roni define 'tertiary' from their perspective.

LA: To me, tertiary means - and it does actually mean! - third level. There's no debate about that, although over the years it has become accepted as a term for anything that's post-compulsory education. But I think the fact that we're using the term tertiary for this new framework and approach means there's a real concern that this will be an assimilation of the college sector into the higher education sector, rather than a genuine inclusion, as the focus will still be drawn to universities and essentially higher education; and I think there's a real danger that the college sector and other adult education providers will be excluded rather than included.

RB: Well, I do just think of it as anything that is post-secondary, but what a mishmash that is. It also struck me that it's a funny word for it as well, because if you think about the economy, you've got primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. Primary and secondary, I think, are about producing goods and this third, the tertiary sector, is the service sector. And so there's a logic there that we are producing a service.

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And so for me it's very much about how good is that service? Can we really do something wonderful for the students in the process of surviving ourselves? But what you were saying just then about the different cultures, Lorraine, I was also struck by the idea that the cultures between institutions in the higher education sector are enormously different.

Yes, and what you were saying before, Lorraine, about recognition of value, I thought, yes, maybe there's a big opportunity here for reviving the recognition of the value of really good learning and teaching. But there's a certain approach to learning and teaching that I think we have moved on from in universities.

LA: Yes, but that point you've just made, Roni, it's, you know, you have an assumption about how colleagues work in colleges - we all do. And it reminds me, and I think it was Stephen Brookfield who talks about 'assumption hunting'. Maybe we should do this kind of activity across sectors and around institutions and perhaps we'll find that we're not so different and a lot of the things that we make assumptions about don't actually exist. But even if we do establish some key differences, we need to question them, and not just rub them out if we don't like them. We need to ask ourselves some questions. Why is the college sector still doing this? Or why does the higher education sector do something different? What are the perceived - and real - benefits? Or drawbacks? I was always a fan of assumption hunting in this way.

Initial thoughts and reflections on the Teaching Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)

From our initial discussion, there is growing enthusiasm and excitement about our topic and its implications. Here, we delve deeper into some of the key points highlighted above, starting with this notion of 'reinventing the wheel' that Lorraine used, and pondering what in the framework is new. Lorraine reflects that maybe what is new is in fact the newness itself. The context then is the newness. How does this help us define the term, however?

LA: I should be more positive, which we all should be. I would say that the new tertiary approach has enormous potential, enormous potential, and I think for years we've probably all recognised the challenges of students coming through from school into university, or into college, and then from college into university, and the work that we've done to support these transitions.

Roni highlighted a lot of that for me, and working with students at the University of Dundee, I could see that there were challenges for them in transitioning, and that it could have been so much more connected and streamlined; and not just connections for students, but for staff as well. I am fortunate to have worked with colleagues from the college sector so I know a bit more about what they do, but there's still so much difference between the two environments of college and university and lack of understanding about what goes on. So there are huge opportunities there to make it much more joined up, integrated, and inclusive - all the words that they use, and say they want to see, in the tertiary framework.

But I think it's going to take many more - and braver - conversations than the ones that are being had at the moment.

RB: I don't want to seem like a contrarian, but this thing about reinventing the wheel.

Actually, I don't worry about that because I think that they would *not* reinvent the wheel. Normally we're adjusting it, the wheel, as it goes round, and so it doesn't look completely different at the end; but if we were involved in a process of thinking about what that wheel is, how does it work? Can we improve it? What small improvements could be made to the resource we've got? We're never going to have a completely new wheel because a wheel, as such, works, but we're constantly tinkering with it.

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And so every, let's say that every five years, our institutions will restructure educational development, for example, and people then think they're doing something completely new and different within that new set-up. They're not, but neither are they reinventing the wheel. They are repurposing the wheel, adjusting it, rethinking about, you know, who might use it. So I'm not too worried about the wheel thing because I think that's in the realities of changing things. Change management is about accepting that you're constantly going back round.

I was thinking about John Cowan's loopy diagram. I don't know if you remember that one, where he talked about going round and round; but it wasn't just a reflective cycle.

You're going round and round, and I think that's what tends to happen.

LA: And again, I think that's very fair as long as it's not just that same wheel that you're turning round, and it's identical, because it shouldn't be.

RB: Yes.

LA: It really can't be can it?

Because the context is always different, so it should be changing, but I worry that in some respects this doesn't happen, that they're just taking things apart, looking at it, and putting it back exactly as it was before.

RB: Yes.

LA: And maybe it won't be in every context but from what I've read recently about the tertiary context, it is a bit depressing, because there's a lot of learning that could be built upon to make a much better wheel, rather than the one that we've already got that's 'just working'.

CC: Lorraine, it was you who talked about the need for braver conversations - what do you mean by that?

LA: OK, for me it's about not ignoring the elephants in the room and I think there are three big elephants.

The first one is culture. You can't get away from the fact that different cultures - for both staff and students - exist in the college sector and in the higher education sector. We can't ignore it; we have to talk about it.

The second is about identity. Again, look at the transitions work about supporting students moving from being 'a college student' to 'a university student'. Get staff to talk to one another about their identity as a university or a college teacher. We have to have those conversations and take what's good out of both sectors and be prepared to change what's not so good. And I think that's going to be a real sticking point.

And the third is about value; we've got to value a college education. We've got to value the qualifications that come out of a college education, not see it as second class, which I think as a society we often still do; but no one really wants to say that, you know, that's a difficult thing to say.

Recommendations going forward

In this next section, having explored the challenges, opportunities and considered a shared understanding of the meaning of 'tertiary' in our Scottish context, it is useful to begin to look forward and to identify how we can make this new landscape work for us.

LA: We've got to get staff talking to one another for a start, and not just within universities, but within colleges. And they've got to get into each other's areas physically as well as mentally, to talk to one another and have those kinds of conversations that we've talked about. I think if they're not going to have those

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discussions at a higher level, then people on the ground need to have them to get a better understanding of one another, and to make connections. They're all there for the same reason in terms of supporting student learning, so that gives them a very good starting point, but at the moment I think they probably feel like people from different countries.

RB: I'm just thinking about how you get people talking in a way that's a dialogue rather than a monologue or instruction. And I'm thinking about the parallel between these two sectors joining up and universities like ones that I have worked for, which have very good collaborative partnerships with overseas partners. And I think very often those are either colonial type arrangements where we are supporting the quality of education in other countries because we 'know better'. Or simply a financial transaction; but probably a mixture of both. And how do we then make it not just that "we're gonna tell you how to do quality because we're universities and we've been doing it for a long time and we're really good at it", but turn it into the humility of saying maybe we've got something to learn here and how do we have a genuine dialogue. The dialogue has probably been a lot at the top level because that's how things go but remember that old thing about doing things top down, middle out, and bottom up. So how do we get the people on the ground talking to each other bottom up as well as the top down stuff and as well as the really important middle out work. And those are people like programme leaders and people with some role of responsibility within their departments, for example. So I think it would be good to be really creative about how we get those different sorts of people talking to each other, which is a challenge because everybody's busy. But that would be really helpful.

LA: And that is perhaps where the tertiary framework and all the work around it could help by creating those spaces and *really* creating them, not saying, you know, "we hope you'll do this" or "we'd like you to do this", but mandating it by saying to institutions that they have to make time for it. They have to support their staff in making time for it, and I'm aware we're talking just about staff here, but students of course also have to have those conversations and be facilitated into having them. But everyone needs to be talking.

RB: There are structural implications too, aren't there? So thinking back to when the polytechnics entered the HE sector at the beginning, and were known as universities post-'92, one of the things that had to happen was the teaching loads in the polytechnics had to be reduced because they couldn't possibly do the things that universities were doing, like research, if they were also teaching twenty hours a week or more. It's hard to imagine that that could happen, but those structural considerations are just as fundamental as having nice conversations with people.

LA: Yes and I don't think they would necessarily be nice conversations, Roni.

I think they would need to be what are often called 'courageous conversations' and would involve being very honest with people, and with the students, but you're right. I think the challenge here is if you're a student in college, experiencing that amount of timetabled teaching, and having a very regulated timetable, and then you go to university where you've got so much 'free time', which isn't free of course but you know people see it like that. That's really hard for them to get their head around. It's really hard to suddenly become that different kind of student with that kind of responsibility; it's a really difficult shift to make. But if the tertiary framework is to have the seamless, streamlined pathway as intended, then I think colleges have to give a bit. Universities have to give a bit as well too, or else we're back to talking about assimilation - "you leave that behind and you come and do what we do now because it's better, you know". Both sides have to be flexible.

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RB: Just like wheels, I don't think there's anything wrong with seams, and if you happen to catch like I did The Great British Sewing Bee programme last night, there was a great deal of emphasis on overlaying. I've never watched it before, but they were overlaying seams with a different coloured thread to make them into a feature, and it struck me that that is a good way of looking at transitions. If we are asking people to move from one place to another, at least recognising where they're moving to and from is important. I'm going to end on a positive note. Like you said, Catriona, the educational development community is really good at doing all of these things that we have been talking about. So, their role is even greater now and should be even greater than it has been previously, because we know how to facilitate those conversations.

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