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The Week in Higher Education

00 Will Gavin Williamson still be in a job by the time you read this? There were mounting calls for England’s education secretary to be sacked after his humiliating U-turn over A-level grading, which culminated on 17 August in the abandonment of an algorithm that downgraded more than a quarter of a million A-level results, effectively skewering the hopes and dreams of students – apart from those attending private schools – in a bid to protect the integrity of an exam-less assessment system. Just two days earlier, Mr Williamson had told The Times: “This is it. No U-turn, no change.” Now universities face the headache of trying to accommodate students who now meet the requirements of offers they previously fell short of – and some of these applicants will want to release themselves from other offers that they had previously confirmed. This onerous task can now be added to the long list of failings of Boris Johnson’s government in its handling of the coronavirus pandemic – and Mr Williamson also bears significant responsibility for another catastrophic shortcoming, the far-too-lengthy disruption to schoolchildren’s education. Surely it is now only a matter of time before he is expelled from the Cabinet?

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00 Of all the restrictions imposed on traditional student life in the coronavirus era, it was of course the “bonking ban” that attracted the attention of the UK’s tabloids. “Randy students who risk breaking rules for a bunk-up face fines of up to £800,” reported The Sun of new guidelines at the University of Bristol that limit undergraduates to a bubble of 12 to 15 students in their accommodation, and which ban parties and overnight visits in halls. Students will only be allowed to meet people not in their “living circle” outside and while following social distancing rules, said The Sun, which added that other institutions were drawing up similar guidelines. Needs must, in these uncertain times. But does anyone else, apart from The Sun, still say “bonking”?

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00 One of the strangest higher education stories of the summer erupted when it was announced that a queer Native American professor known to thousands on Twitter had died of Covid-19. Scientists around the world sent condolences and expressed anger that her university had forced her to continue teaching as coronavirus spread across the US. But the anger turned to shock when it emerged that the individual known as @Sciencing_Bi was actually a fake identity that had run for the past four years, interacting with scientists and posting about life as a bisexual Indigenous American scholar, including her experience of sexual harassment. Another academic, BethAnn McLaughlin, former associate professor of neuroscience at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, told The New York Times that she “took full responsibility” for creating the fake account. “My actions are inexcusable,” she said.

00 After Jerry Falwell Jr was placed on leave by Liberty University, will change finally come to the Trump-aligned US campus? The devoutly Christian institution asked its president to “take an indefinite leave of absence” after he posted an online photo of himself on a yacht, holding a drink with his arm around his wife’s assistant and his trousers unzipped. His behaviour, as shown in the Instagram photo, would have earned a Liberty student more than £9,900 (€14,500) in fines and possible expulsion. Previously it has been alleged that Mr Falwell partied at nightclubs, graphically discussed his sex life with employees and made extensive personal use of university funds, while in June the university made him apologise for a Twitter post that included a face mask with a Ku Klux Klan depiction. Liberty attributed his behaviour to the “substantial pressure” that comes with “the burdens of leading a large and growing organisation”.

00 England’s higher education regulator has been left with a hefty bill after a for-profit college won an appeal against a ruling that blocked it from accessing public student loans. In March, a court backed the Office for Students’ decision to refuse registration to the Bloomsbury Institute over quality and management concerns. But the Court of Appeal announced on 14 August that it had quashed the decision and ordered the OfS to reconsider the institution’s application and to repay it £144,500 in costs as well as legal costs. The OfS has faced several legal challenges from institutions refused inclusion on its register of providers, so the new ruling could have serious ramifications for the sector.

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India’s much-awaited National Education Policy (NEP), published late last month, has attracted both praise and criticism. Some of that seems to be based on the ideological disposition of the current government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, there is no doubt that the NEP is progressive and promising in many respects.

The document, a draft of which was published last year, lays out India’s vision to develop its education sector in order to emerge as a leading knowledge power. While some of the early controversies are about its recommendation that the medium of instruction in schools be the children’s mother tongue or the local or regional language, the proposals are fairly solid with respect to higher education.

There are at least three aspects of the Indian system that the NEP deals with very well. First is the problem of fragmentation. According to government data for 2018-19, India’s 37.4 million students are served by 983 universities, 39,931 colleges and 10,725 stand-alone institutions.

The last of these offer degrees or diplomas in select disciplines, such as hotel management and catering, management and teacher training. But many colleges also offer degrees in a very limited number of disciplines: sometimes only one or two. That is why 16 per cent of colleges have fewer than 100 students and 48 per cent (nearly 19,000! haves fewer than 500.

The NEP aims to correct this by moving towards “a higher educational system consisting of large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges”, facilitating “a more multidisciplinary undergraduate education”. The policy calls for single-stream institutions to be gradually amalgamated into larger institutions or “HEI clusters/knowledge hubs”, containing at least 3,000 students.

Second, while this may seem trivial, the NEP clarifies the meaning of higher education institutions and categorises them appropriately. Until now, an institution could be classified as a “university”, “deemed to be university”, “affiliating university”, “affiliating technical university” or various other terms. This created unnecessary confusion, especially regarding the specific set of rules and regulations that applied to each. This practice will be discontinued and all institutions will henceforth be categorised as either a college or a university.

Another important distinction introduced in the NEP is between research-intensive universities and teaching-intensive universities. While the latter are not expected to be limited to teaching alone, in privileging their role as teaching-focused institutions it is hoped that faculty at these universities will no longer feel compelled to publish in predatory journals for career advancement.

Third, the NEP deserves praise for redefining the length and structure of undergraduate programmes. The typical three-year degree is to be replaced by a programme of three or four years’ duration, with multiple exit options within this period. Students will be awarded a certificate after completing one year of study, a diploma after two years and a bachelor’s degree after three. However, the “preferred option” would be the four-year multidisciplinary bachelor’s programme, which includes a research component and would make students eligible for a one-year master’s programme, instead of the usual two-year requirement. It is expected that the multiple-exit option will lend more flexibility to undergraduate education.

There are several other praiseworthy aspects of the NEP, including its mention of attracting reputed international universities to set up campuses in India. However, whether any of this comes to pass remains unclear. The truth is that the document in essence provides a set of recommendations that will remain subject to different kinds of interpretation by the key stakeholders, including the government. For example, while the policy insists on autonomy for institutions, the track record of the current and previous governments is one of consistent and significant political meddling. This will not change simply with the release of a new document.

Moreover, as already pointed out by others, it is far from a given that the document will even be implemented. Writing in a leading national daily, India’s vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu noted that the “landmark” document was “long overdue” and called for the focus to now shift to “its efficient and effective implementation”. But the coming months and years will see whether that actually comes to pass.

Pushkar is director of the International Centre Goa, Dona Paula (Goa). These are his personal views.

A step in the right direction

The NEP’s system consolidation, regulatory simplification and undergraduate flexibility are positive, says Pushkar

When I was growing up in 1970s Brussells, I was convinced that consideration of gender was an error of the past. We were all individuals, with variable skills and talents. Our mothers gave (breast) milk bottles to their partners to share-feed their babies; there were no “girl’s” and “boy’s” toy sections in our shops; we all had knitting and woodwork classes at school; and the stronger maths students in my class were girls.

Three decades later, we seem to have gone back to a pink and blue world. And while about 65 per cent of postdocs in biomedicine are now female, that still drops to 25 per cent of established research team leaders and 5 per cent of senior university leaders.

Almost all proposed remedies to this senior gender imbalance rest on the skewed premise that the established (white) man’s approach — dominance, exclusive focus, stoicism — is best, so we need to fix the “soft” behavioural traits most often found in women. We are used, for instance, to hearing that women’s “lack of confidence” and/or family responsibilities push them to stay too long at the postdoctoral level, or to leave academia entirely. But shouldn’t we expect all parents to feel responsible enough to balance their professional ambitions?

More importantly, my experience as a group leader and departmental chair confirms that lack of confidence is quite evenly distributed across genders, but manifests itself differently (culture and upbringing also have an
Obliging women to adopt ‘male’ characteristics is not just unfair – it also impoverishes university management, says Corinne Houart

The same biased valuation occurs around the pay gap. We established that the problem partly lies in women’s reluctance to ask for promotion. I would suggest that many men are actually asking for promotion too often. It is certainly reasonable to question a system that rewards scientists who chase posts in competing universities to boost their salary and lab support well above the local norm.

Still, it would be wrong – as some articles do – to simplistically paint “men’s traits” as bad and women’s as perfect. This is just flipping the bias. The world is not only pink or blue, and we need both ends of the gender spectrum to recognise that. If current leaders stopped unconsciously training their successors in their own image, leadership would be attractive to a broad set of personalities with unique approaches.

But how? I have taken part in many “women in leadership” and “gender pay gap” meetings, but their emphasis on fixing women is reflected in the very low male attendance. Universities would be better advised to define clear, unbiased criteria for leadership excellence that integrate human diversity, and then establish two structures.

First, we need goal-driven mentoring workshops for leaders, aimed at deepening self-awareness, transforming narratives and broadening skills. Leaders currently have little time for issues perceived as non-urgent, so perhaps each leader could simply be shadowed for a week by someone from an established team of independent, bias-trained observers, who would then provide them with written, confidential feedback. The exercise could be repeated a year later to allow progress to be measured, and the anonymised feedback could be compiled into a very useful report, distributed across university leaders.

That report could also feed into a working group charged with identifying the most important limitations in leadership and defining the priorities for changes.

An active reshaping of the definition of leadership is a path to a balanced and more effective professional world that makes full use of our diverse brains – including those inclined towards soft, thoughtful and caring approaches.

It is not enough for women to be in the room. We need to be able to lead while staying ourselves – and seeing our qualities integrated into men’s leadership, too.

Corinne Houart is deputy head of the Centre for Developmental Neurobiology at the MRC Centre for Neurodevelopmental Disorders, King’s College London.