

Ron Barnett: 'From knowledge to competence: mass higher education in the UK'

In keeping with many other European countries, the UK has seen the arrival of a mass higher education system. The UK perhaps also shares with its neighbours other features of its contemporary higher education system, such as concerns on the part of the state to gain greater societal - especially economic - impact and continuing challenges in opening higher education to participants from lower socio-economic classes. There are, however, perhaps some features of the pattern of UK undergraduate provision that are particularly marked. In particular, we have witnessed a slide from a concern with knowledge to a concern with competence: in the UK, the 'skills' agenda is influential.

This reflects a re-positioning of the higher education system that is now more oriented towards the wider economy both directly and indirectly: directly, in that curricula have been modified explicitly to incorporate a significant element of skills; indirectly in that students are being encouraged to take on an identity as 'consumers' whose needs - including their interests in their future 'employability' - institutions now need to take account of. We have also witnessed a marked differentiation across institutions of higher education, which in turn affects the character of the undergraduate student experience.

In my presentation, I shall draw out some of these features of the UK higher education system and - very lightly - situate my remarks in a wider social, historical and philosophical landscape.