

Education

The future of the university in the age of Covid

As students start a term like no other, higher education is being reinvented for the post-pandemic world

Henry Mance SEPTEMBER 18 2020

Shortly after the start of lockdown, British households became hooked on the BBC's adaptation of Sally Rooney's novel [*Normal People*](#). The show's protagonists, Marianne and Connell, fall in love at school and find each other again at university — first at a party, then in a bar, then in her rooms. In their own melancholic way, they live the undergraduate dream — love, growing up, intellectual pretension.

It couldn't happen now. Trinity College Dublin, where *Normal People* takes place, has moved some of its teaching online and placed a ban on parties, in line with coronavirus restrictions. Students in university accommodation are no longer allowed overnight visitors.

Given there will be fewer in-person events, some new undergraduates are wondering whether they actually need to live in Dublin, says Eoin Hand, president of Trinity's student union. Perhaps they can commute instead, "from Tipperary, Limerick and Mayo", and save the €500-plus a month on accommodation. So much for immersing yourself in studies, societies and socialising.

Across the world, coronavirus has fundamentally changed the student experience. It has cut away at the freedom, serendipity and physical closeness of campus life. It has also reinvigorated the debate about what universities should offer, and to whom. The UK prides itself on its £40bn higher education sector, ranging from elite institutions to former polytechnics. But the short-term shock of the pandemic has created an expectation that all organisations will rethink how they operate.

Initially, British universities thought that coronavirus would be a financial torpedo. Internal emails were “apocalyptic”, says one lecturer. The throttling of air travel would surely cut off international students, whose £6bn in annual fees fund much of the research at the UK’s top universities. Domestic students were expected to defer, rather than put up with online teaching.

The reality has not been so bleak, at least so far. In fact the pandemic has underlined the demand for what universities do. Imperial College London has modelled the virus’s spread; Oxford is at the forefront of vaccine research.



The one-way system in place at Lucy Cavendish College, at the University of Cambridge, as the new term gets under way © Simon Martin

The UK's A-level results scandal, where many school-leavers were distraught that their algorithmically adjusted exam grades were not good enough for their desired universities, brought home the aspiration for higher education. The government responded by lifting the cap on student numbers; [top universities are now expecting more students](#) than ever.

Unlike in Australia, overseas student numbers also seem to have kept up in Britain, helped by universities' promise to maintain some face-to-face teaching and even to charter flights from China. Numbers will only become clear as students arrive in the next fortnight, but Cambridge is on course for a slight increase in international undergraduates, with a slight fall in international postgraduates.

"The mood isn't as gloomy as it was in the late spring," says Nick Petford, vice-chancellor of the University of Northampton, where overseas students numbers appear to have dropped about 30 per cent from last year. Yet as hundreds of thousands of young people in Britain arrive on campus for the first time, some may conclude the experience is not as fun or as educational as it was cracked up to be. The word "refund" may spring to mind. A [petition calling for last year's fees to be refunded](#) received more than 350,000 signatures.

In the short term, British universities' ability to operate depends on their hygiene and social distancing. In the long term, it depends on their social licence in a country where education has become a political dividing line.

The left argues universities do not select enough talented students, regardless of background. The right argues universities are selecting too many students unsuited for further study. Can universities assuage them both?

Lucy Cavendish is one of the younger colleges at Cambridge. Located on the fringes of the historic centre, it was founded in 1965 for older women who had missed out on university. "We are a college that has always served the underserved," says president Madeleine Atkins.

Now Lucy Cavendish is thinking bigger. It wants to be a model for Oxbridge's future. Women are no longer the under-represented group: they make up half of Cambridge's intake. So Lucy Cavendish wants to be as diverse as Britain in terms of class, ethnicity and disability. It plans to more than double in size, from 400 to 1,000 students. "That's the equivalent of bringing a whole new college to Cambridge," says Atkins. Her aim is to create a genuinely inclusive atmosphere, where students don't have to "pretend to be what they aren't. Diversity is more than metrics."



Madeleine Atkins, president of Lucy Cavendish College, established for older women who had missed out on university © Simon Martin





Lucy Cavendish College, a constituent college of the University of Cambridge, was founded in 1965 © Simon Martin

By becoming nationally representative, Lucy Cavendish hopes to raise the bar for other colleges to follow suit. For the first time, 70 per cent of Cambridge's intake will this year come from state schools, which account for nearly 90 per cent of the country's school leavers. There are questions about how far universities can correct for the advantages that more privileged young people accumulate before the age of 18. But Cambridge wants to go further, while only increasing total student numbers modestly. ("The very top universities tend to be our size or frankly smaller," says its vice-chancellor Stephen Toope.)

Lucy Cavendish is looking for £150m in donations for its expansion, potentially in exchange for naming rights. From a single donor, that would be among the largest ever private gifts to a UK university; it would outstrip the £80m that the [Reuben brothers](#) committed last year to found a college at Oxford. Whether such largesse is forthcoming in a recession remains to be seen.

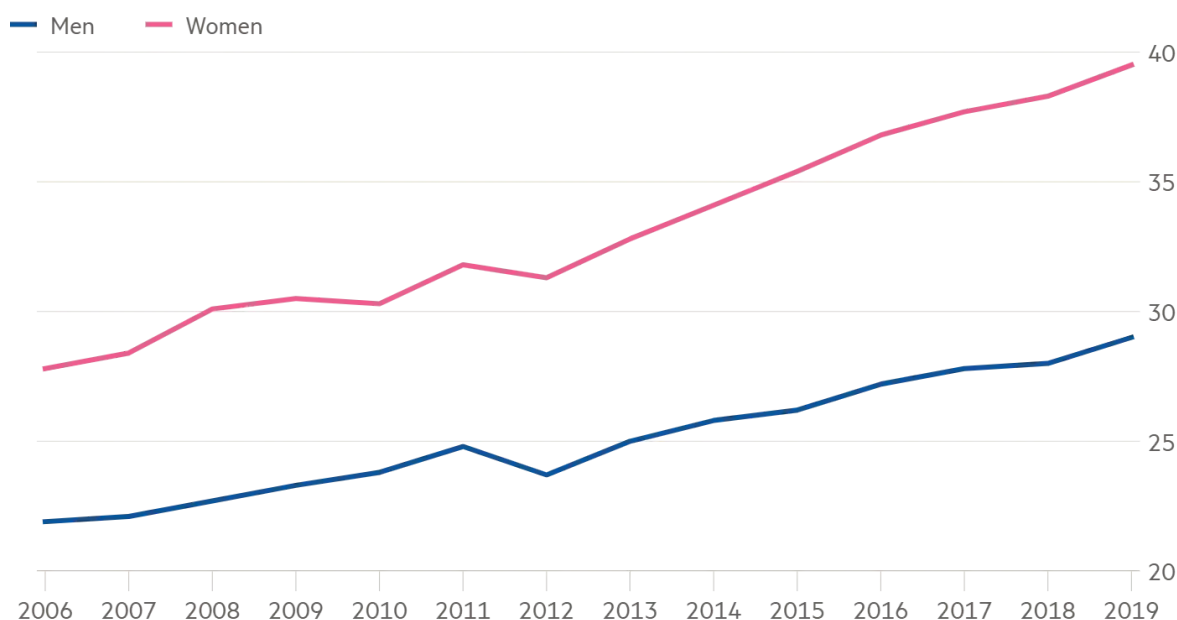
Coronavirus has accelerated Lucy Cavendish's plans. It is taking more students than expected, and is looking to use household bubbles — of six to eight students — to promote diversity. "We have the chance really to put together people from rather different backgrounds," says Atkins.

What is notable, though, is how much Lucy Cavendish wishes to keep the same. Among office workers, coronavirus has led to the adoption of remote working and online meetings, perhaps permanently. But in universities, filled with digitally adept young people, the appetite is much lower. Students don't have long commutes; they already spend far fewer hours in face-to-face settings than white-collar workers do; and they are still growing up.

“Learning is a social act. People want to learn alongside human beings and they want the validation of other human beings,” says Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute think-tank. Cambridge, like other British universities, is adopting “blended learning”, with some teaching online and some face-to-face. Lectures are being put online, which may be the start of a broader transformation.

More young people are opting to go to university

Entry rate to UK undergraduate courses (% of entire population aged 18)



Source: Ucas
© FT

The University of Leeds' new vice-chancellor, Dutch health expert [Simone Buitendijk](#), has said 45-minute lectures are “outdated” and “pedagogically not sound”. She is in favour of shorter online chunks, which can be debated in class. Even in that vision, in-person tuition remains central. In online tutorials, “there's a lack of spontaneity,” says Atkins of Lucy Cavendish. “Students want that face-to-face experience.”

([In the US, one in 10 universities will teach fully online](#) this autumn, according to The College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College; one-quarter will teach primarily or fully in person.)

To juggle the influx of students and social distancing, universities are adopting temporary fixes. Accommodation is being shifted around, laboratory hours are being extended, and lecturers are preparing to divide pupils into smaller groups — even if it means more teaching. Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at Oxford, says of his own teaching schedule: “We will basically work twice the hours . . . On the assumption the pandemic’s only got two years to run, it’s not the worst situation.”

For the top universities, coronavirus is more about adjustments than overhauls. Having been forced to abandon in-person exams last term, Cambridge may look to different forms of assessment. “The idea that the only mechanism is two or three-hour examinations is simply not right,” says vice-chancellor Toope. The university also plans to test students with symptoms, at a forecast cost of £800,000 to £1m over the year; Toope hopes it may provide lessons for the government’s own programme.

Across universities, there will be fewer visiting academics and fewer dinners. Many freshers’ fairs will be online. Some get-togethers won’t happen. “Societies, particularly sports, really want to do in-person events. They say it’s important for mental health,” says Hasan Zakria, a student union officer at Soas University of London. “But health and safety have to come first.”



Students at Soas University of London on Tuesday © Greg Funnell

Even if the university experience seems hollowed out, it may still be better than the alternative. “Young people have been stuck at home with their parents since March. Of course they want to get on with their lives — even if it won’t be as good as in their brother’s or sister’s year,” says Hillman. What’s more, the experience is only part of what students want — they really need the CV points.

In other ways, too, the pandemic is an interruption, rather than an about-turn. Take international students. At Cambridge, tuition fees do not cover the cost of each domestic undergraduate or postgraduate, leaving the university to fill the gap with overseas fees, research grants and philanthropy.

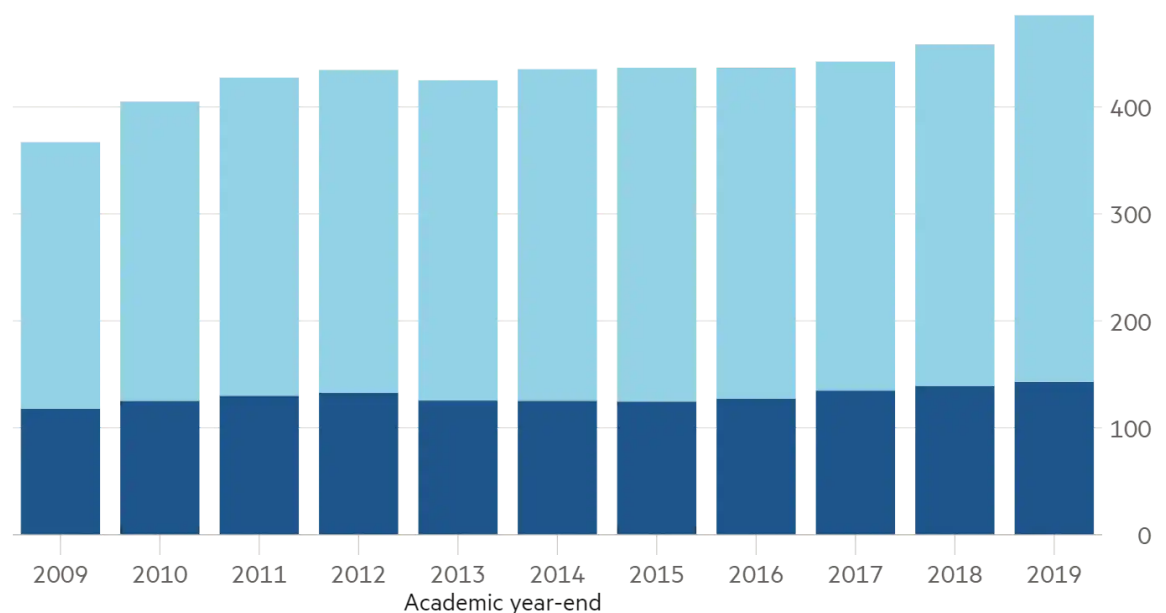
Weaning elite universities off international students may not be desirable. It would also probably require a large injection of public funding. Instead the government has a target of 600,000 international students a year by 2030. That is an increase of a quarter from the current level, even though from next autumn EU students coming to UK universities will no longer pay the same fees as domestic students.

What coronavirus has done is remind some universities of the risks involved. [More Chinese students go abroad to university in the UK](#) than any other country, including to the US — 120,000 in 2018/19. Can such numbers survive political tensions? Could universities recruit more from, say, India instead?

Rise of international students

Non-UK students studying at UK universities ('000s)

■ EU ■ Non-EU



Source: HESA

© FT

The outlook for universities may become more negative if overseas students do not turn up, and if social distancing measures fail to stop outbreaks. US universities have seen tens of thousands of coronavirus cases. Modellers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign told the [New York Times](#) that they had not anticipated that some students would not isolate, even after receiving positive tests.

Financially, universities have frozen hiring, hitting young academics looking to get on the career ladder. Pension deficits were already yawning. A few universities, particularly those small, lower-ranking institutions that were struggling already, may merge. The University of East London says it needs to cut costs by £10.7m. But talk of bailouts and closures looks premature. Historically, few universities disappear. Even weaker institutions often resonate politically, particularly those that are the largest employers in their area or are located in “Red Wall” seats recently won by the Tory party, says Oxford’s Marginson.

So the question is less, will universities survive, but can they continue to grow?

In 2017 the journalist David Goodhart published [*The Road to Somewhere*](#), which argued there was a political battle between the educated and cosmopolitan (“Anywheres”) and the low-paid and culturally conservative (“Somewheres”). It was seized on by those seeking intellectual ballast for Brexit.

Goodhart’s new book, [*Head Hand Heart*](#), extends his analysis — taking aim at universities and the “bloated cognitive class” they have created. It argues that the UK already has too many graduates who end up in low-paying jobs, and that employers, and society as a whole, should give greater esteem to non-graduates. “There was a time when we did need a bigger cognitive meritocracy. That time probably ended 10 years ago, or a bit longer,” Goodhart says.

Such thinking has friends in high places. In July Gavin Williamson, the Conservative education secretary, symbolically abandoned Tony Blair’s aim for half of 18-year-olds to go to university. He insists that further education qualifications, not degrees, are the key to “[levelling up](#)” Britain’s poorest regions.

Many in Britain are envious of Germany’s system of technical colleges and apprenticeships. Goodhart thinks politicians should stop subsidising university expansion, “so that young people flow into other things that are not so cognitively focused”. If politicians don’t act, the automation of white-collar jobs will disrupt universities anyway.

For much of the university sector, Goodhart's thesis is frustrating. "I think that argument is wrong at almost every level," says Hillman of think-tank HEPI. "Even Germans would say it was wrong, because they're expanding their numbers in higher education."

Marginson, of Oxford university, points out that, unlike Germany and South Korea, the UK is a services economy, rather than a manufacturing one. "The myth that gets created is that there are lots of vocational, high-paying jobs. That's all nonsense."

Learning is a social act. People want to learn with humans, they want the validation of other humans

Perhaps the university sector's biggest complaint is that some newer universities already do much of what the government demands. The [University of Northampton opened a £330m new campus](#) in 2018. The campus has just one lecture hall, prioritising online learning and group study. The university works with the local leather industry, including Dr Martens and Church's, to fit their need for skills.

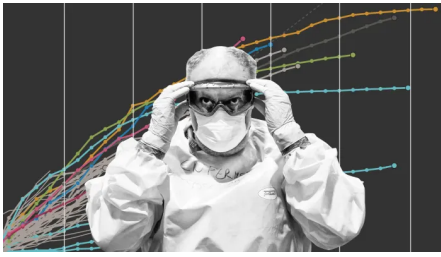
Nick Petford, its vice-chancellor, is eyeing the opportunity to offer more vocational courses, particularly for those changing careers, which could be funded by students or employers. Coronavirus has been a "catalyst", he says. "Universities have discovered things can be done quickly." One difficulty has been the lack of national standards for particular trades. Student funding is also geared towards undergraduates.

The political winds will probably also push the top universities to partner with further education providers. But university administrators are tired of outsiders' gloomy predictions.

For them, the dominant force is not AI, distance learning or political tensions; it's the desire of young people to go to university. In 2010, the [Millennium Cohort Study](#) asked mothers of children born at the turn of the millennium whether they hoped their children would go to university; 97 per cent said yes. At the age of 14, the children themselves were asked how likely they were to go university; on average, [they gave themselves a two-thirds chance](#).

Latest coronavirus news

"In the depths of the [A-level results] crisis, did you hear anyone speak about alternatives like apprenticeships? No," says David Bell, vice-chancellor of Sunderland university.



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Increased life expectancy means that you can now do a doctorate and still have spent the same proportion of your life in education as someone with just an undergraduate degree did in 1945. The coming year will be different to anything that students have faced before. In a time of upheaval, it's tempting to see revolution on every horizon. Yet, when the pandemic is over, universities will be a place for normal people, as well as *Normal People*.

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