

Going local: the time and place of higher education institutions

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Jill Pellew and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Utopian Universities: A Global History of the New Campuses of the 1960s*, Bloomsbury, 2021

Holly Henderson, *Non-University Higher Education: Geographies of Place, Possibility, and Inequality*, Bloomsbury, 2021.

How can we better understand the *when* and *where* of higher education, and why should we? How can we connect and differentiate between institutions beyond the obvious characteristics of national setting, size, age, and status, while still being mindful of these elements? Two books released this year offer insights into these questions, *Utopian Universities* edited by Jill Pellew and Miles Taylor, and *Non-University Higher Education* by Holly Henderson. What emerges from both individually, but particularly when they are read together, is how time and place are not only important but that they perpetually intertwined.

It is well documented that where you study or work, geographically, organisationally, and reputationally, combined with who you are, is materially important in terms of study or working conditions and educational and social trajectories (e.g. Spurling 2015; Bennett 2018). There has been, though, a relative neglect of *place* in higher education in the sense of institutions as sites that constitute a simultaneous combination of historical, social, and physical elements (Temple 2019). Some of this may be associated with organizational anonymity around ethical and/or reputational concerns, but a great deal can be learnt without identifying exactly what the locations of enquiry were. Without unpacking individual institutions in depth, though, we can be left with the implication that what transpires within universities of similar profiles – what Whyte (2021) calls ‘family resemblances’ – is somewhat uniform. It is, of course, important to understand how wider macro trends play out, but not at the cost of the local or micro.

This review first provides an overview of these two books. It then pays particular attention to the distinctive but overlapping ways that temporality and geography play out in them, before considering what their contributions to the literature might be and what they might have done differently.

Overview

Utopian Universities (2021) is an edited collection focusing on the foundation and early years of a number of universities, around the world, established as completely new institutions in the 1960s. Each chapter draws on documentary evidence and sometimes personal anecdote, particularly where authors were working at those institutions at the time. It consists of two parts, the first being dedicated to how this story unfolded in the UK, the second incorporating international perspectives.

The UK element encompasses what Beloff (1970) termed the UK’s ‘plateglass’ universities, seven of which are in England (East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick, and York), one in Scotland (Stirling), and one in Northern Ireland (Ulster). These are distinct from the more applied British institutions that gained university status around the time, such as Bath or Strathclyde, which were expanded from already existing Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs). Outside the UK, chapters feature the University of California, British Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, Africa and

Southeast Asia, then Canada (Simon Fraser, York, Trent), Australia (Flinders, La Trobe, Macquarie), Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, Nanterre in France, and Germany (Bochum, Konstanz, Bielefeld).

Underpinning this book is the sense that these institutions can be viewed somewhat collectively, being state commissioned, designed and built from scratch, and underpinned by iterations of a particular ethos which inherited some past traditions while distancing itself from others. A number of themes are common to most of the chapters: the socio-political context, architecture, location, pedagogy, and disciplinary mix. *Utopian Universities* paints a credible portrait of a group of individual universities doing something relatively distinctive at a particular historical juncture. The prevailing view is that their development was cruelly interrupted by the financial crises and funding cuts of the 1970s, and then neoliberalism. In short, it is suggested that their vision never really had a chance to be realized and much of their initial promise was lost.

Non-University Higher Education (2021) is a single author monograph documenting a recent empirical study of higher education provision at two English colleges which also – and often primarily – offer other kinds of education and training. Narratively, it describes a theoretical and somewhat ethnographic project involving documentary analysis, staff and student interviews, as well as the researcher's own reflections and descriptions of the two research sites and their wider environs.

As the book outlines, there is no simple typology of these colleges in that they may offer two or more forms of education from secondary to vocational, adult training to higher. They come under the remit of differing and potentially competing policies, ministries, and third party agencies, but offer university degrees written or validated, and then awarded, by a university. These colleges are more academically and logistically accessible, having more relaxed admissions criteria and being more geographically dispersed than universities. They also have financial and other attractions as their degree provision can be cheaper, often teach through smaller classes, and offer more part-time or other flexible routes than universities do. They are, though, peripheral in the UK's hierarchically differentiated higher education, where status is important and certain forms of 'traditional' student life are considered to be the superior norm.

The core question at the heart of *Non-University Education* is how place, im-/mobility, educational spaces, and social inequalities, are not only interrelated but can be investigated simultaneously. To answer this, it combines a layering and combination of geographical and sociological concepts. The former allow the location – i.e. the college, town, and surrounding area – to be considered as a place at a point in time, while the latter incorporates the participants' positions within that. This allows for a detailed picture of the students' higher education lives, with their identities and hopes as inseparable from that particular place and time. Their stories are very different to the model of young people for whom the 'student experience' is a residential, all-encompassing rite of passage, and which served as an omnipresent norm against which non-university higher education was perceived.

Dis-/Connected Times

While the two books have a different focus, one core theme in both is that of temporality, in that the wider socio-political climate frames the 'action'. Striking in *Utopian Universities* is the institutions' positioning within the particular juncture of the 1960s and early 1970s. The initial story of the Global North universities is characterised by the coinciding maturation of the baby boomer generation, post-war regeneration, the development of a welfare state, and the Cold War. Extensions and expansions of

secondary education, combined with bulges in the population, meant that the demand for higher education exceeded what existing provision could accommodate. At the same time, growing economies, as well as the scientific, technological, and ideological, race with the Communist Bloc, created demand for graduates across an expanding disciplinary spectrum. In sum, new institutions were viewed as an essential part of the solution, and one that the state saw itself as obliged to support.

The degree provision in colleges in *Non-University Higher Education* represent the latest iteration – at least in the UK – of this continued expansion of higher education, but represents a more subtle addition to the scene than entirely new institutions. It is, though, a further attempt to increase the capacity of the system, particularly in areas where university attendance is low – known as higher education ‘cold spots’ – in the interests of widening access and the nation’s economic health. There is also a discursive connection, in that the residential student experience against which the college students compared their higher education lives took hold through the new 1960s universities, for whom housing students on campus and/or nearby was a defining feature. This was not widespread in the UK before then and has since become prevalent, although this trend appears to be reversing as the cost of a university education rises, particularly in England (HESA 2020).

It possible to discern several other themes in *Utopian Universities* which have either remained relevant or re-emerged some 50 years later, such as the ongoing discussion around social inequalities in higher education and how expanding student numbers impact labour markets (Mok 2016; Ingram and Allen 2018). The book also documents how the rise of 1960s counter culture, in part fostered by universities, encouraged students to militate against social injustices such as the Vietnam War and apartheid, as well as for better representation within their own institutions. This raised questions around free speech and at times exuberant student lifestyles, neither of which were always viewed favourably by the press or local populations. These are still very much live topics today (Sultana 2018; Smith 2020), although for towns with smaller, newer student bodies such as those in *Non-University Higher Education*, the ‘student life’ is very different and much less visible. Another parallel from *Utopian Universities* can be seen in the current fiscal problems faced in the sector around sustaining student numbers and/or servicing building loans in the extended aftermath of economic crises (Barker 2016; Poliakoff 2019; Thatcher et al. 2020).

Interdisciplinary and pedagogy are two other themes which continue to have ongoing resonance. Most institutions in *Utopian Universities* were founded with combined schools rather than disciplinary departments, teaching and researching new subjects and combined degrees such as American Studies and environmental science. Several chapters cited the influence of C.P. Snow’s ‘The Two Cultures’ (1959), which decried a polar separation between the sciences and humanities, noting widespread supported for a period of general studies followed by later specialization. Pedagogy was marked by a greater prevalence of smaller group teaching – the mode employed in non-university colleges. While some universities have reverted to more disciplinary structures, the new subjects and the ongoing development of university teaching have thrived (Evans et al. 2021), and interdisciplinarity continues to be attractive but problematic (Aguiar 2021). The single chapter on new universities across the disintegrating British Empire will be of particular interest to scholars of decolonising (e.g. Bhabra et al. 2018). Their establishment formed part of an often resisted strategy of racist, colonial ‘benevolence’ related to soft power and the training of new elites – educated according to European content and style – to administer countries in the process of gaining independence.

One disjuncture between the *Utopian Universities* period and the present day – and to some extent with *Non-University Higher Education* – is in the role of the state and the state of higher education. Many chapters categorise governments of the time as simultaneously munificent and laissez-faire, allowing Vice Chancellors or their equivalents considerable freedom to create their own vision of a university. The contrast with present day sectors increasingly closely governed by policy and third parties (Shattock and Horvath 2020) is marked. Also, from the mid-1960s, students paid no tuition costs and were granted a living allowance, a system which has now almost universally been replaced with fees and loans. This replacement had an almost immediate, negative impact on mature student numbers in the UK (Marginson 2018), and non-university colleges fulfil an important role in meeting their needs. The 1960s also pre-date the ubiquity of rankings, even if informal hierarchies existed, particularly in the UK (Teichler 2008). What were then the new, upstart universities have now come to resemble the old guard, dominating the more recent arrivals in status and funding. In this way, they are a long way from *Non-University Higher Education's* colleges. As Henderson notes, the colleges are very much peripheral; not poorly ranked but not ranked at all, sitting outside the national and global knowledge production networks which depend on, contribute to, and signify, elevated status (see e.g. Celis and Kim 2018).

Disparate Geographies

A second area of common ground between the books is in their emphasis on location. To some extent it is the central pillar of the *Non-University Higher Education*, but *Utopian Universities* also highlights universities' importance to, and embeddedness in, their locales. Most of the new 1960s institutions were built on greenfield sites in the 'brutalist' style of concrete and (plate) glass and according to a template of a self-contained, residential campus university centred around social and/or other communal and learning spaces. This was relatively new at the time, and most universities which came before (and after) have developed in a more piecemeal fashion. These 'new' universities have continued to grow and change shape, but the core foundation of all facilities in a distinct campus remains. Non-university colleges change shape, too, building new facilities – or repurpose existing ones – for their degree students, but within and around their other provision. There is relatively little work that examines the relationship between campus and student experiences, but the reality (and idea) of the residential student experience is markedly different from that at a non-residential college. In line with work on commuter students (Holton and Finn 2018), the *Non-University Higher Education* participants' time 'on campus' was mostly limited to attending class due to family or job responsibilities, as well there being limited facilities for social interaction. This raises questions about how institutions which attract different kinds of students need to think carefully about ensuring that all groups are catered for (Rapley 2014).

Utopian Universities describes how towns seeking to host a university had to lobby for one; some had tried and failed before, and applications could involve a combination of support from local government, industry, assorted dignitaries, and church/professional associations. This was important not least because of the need for a significant space in which to build a new campus, and in the UK at least, only the central university features were state funded; accommodation was largely funded through donations. The introduction of a new university naturally had local impact. Cities such as Oxford might be impossible to understand without considering how their layout, neighbourhoods, and services, have been shaped by and around their university buildings and other facilities. Most of the towns and cities which first received a new university in the 1960s now have two, and these will have become embedded into their fabric and infrastructure. This is in contrast to towns such as 'Sebford' and 'Tobston' in *Non-*

University Higher Education where the physical and social footprint is so small as to go potentially unnoticed.

The social effects of higher education institutions and their populations feature in both books. An important observation within *Non-University Higher Education* – connecting back to temporality – is the socioeconomic status of their locales. In common many regional British towns, Sebford and Tobston lost a great deal of local industrial capacity and therefore working class jobs from the 1960s onwards as the effects of globalization accelerated. Government policy has not enabled them to recover, and employment opportunities, particularly for graduates, were still relatively limited. Henderson here digs deeper than *Utopian Universities*, developing an understanding through the participants' eyes of how the local is meaningful to them. Some saw leaving the area after graduation as their best or only option, while others were committed to contributing to its regeneration. Also, having a degree could lead to tensions with those who did not, this being situated within an area which has historically had limited exposure to higher education; without the relatively recent addition of this non-university higher education there, the option of studying locally for a degree would not exist.

Holding this train of thought, how might relocating students see their university locations, and what longer term impact do those institutions have? The potential benefits of hosting a university were clearly of interest to lobbying groups given the effort (and resources) they dedicated to applying. Many *Utopian Universities* chapters feature descriptions of tensions between the existing 'town' and its newly added 'gown' – in one case (Stirling) some local amenities and services even refused students' custom for a period. The 'studentification' (Sage et al. 2012) of these towns and cities is now well-established, and it is worth considering what the broader implications there have been in terms of educational discourse and attainment, economic growth and employment opportunities, gentrification and property prices. Where might neighbourhoods such as Bedford Park in southern Adelaide (Flinders), or regional towns such as Oshawa, Ontario (Trent) be without nearly 60 years of hosting sizable university populations (see e.g. Lee 2019)? Equally, where might other towns be now if they had been granted a university?

A connected and fascinating set of further questions relates to mobility, a topic that *Non-University Higher Education* dedicates a great deal of attention to. As already mentioned, the 1960s universities signalled a shift towards a residential higher education experience, and this is particularly true in the UK. Students living away from home, though, has received surprisingly little attention. There is a long-standing discussion in the UK about how students' mobility is class-related as moving away costs money but it has become an unthinking 'choice' for middle class students (Reay et al. 2005; Gamsu and Donnelly 2020). Some want to, or have to, stay at or near home, and this subsequently ties in with the unequal job opportunities between students who can (and know they should) move away to higher status universities and those who cannot (or do not know). There is a problematic assumption that im-/mobility is seen as a binary distinction between the middle and working classes, and *Non-University Higher Education* addresses this. Rather than being 'unable to leave' in a negative sense, many participants were deeply invested in – and mobile within – a local area that they knew intimately. The intellectual and empirical space around wider experiences of mobility of the non-/residential aspects of the student experience is a developing field and deserves much more attention (Finn 2017b).

Contributions

What do these books offer of potential value to scholars of higher education? *Utopian Universities* appears to make two chief contributions to the literature. The first is that the inclusion of multiple universities in one volume allows common trends to become more apparent than single institution studies such as Sanderson (2002) on UEA or Heffernan and Jöns (2018) on Stirling. While Beloff's *The Plate Glass Universities* (1970) and Whyte's (2021) *Learning from Redbrick* incorporate UK universities, the international dimension identifies how in the Global North at least, the new 1960s institutions were variations on a theme at a (somewhat) different sociopolitical time. This then allows for useful comparisons with other pasts or presents to be drawn, some of which have been discussed here. A second contribution is how this book's close examination of many universities brings out their differences. Wider assumptions are regularly made about the convergence of higher education more generally (Zapp and Ramirez 2019), and at the macro or system level this works, to a point. Many 1960s universities have joined their predecessors' high status cliques and in some ways have (had to) emulate them, but they are still not identical to them, though – or each other. In the case of my own institution, Lancaster, elements of the architectural and disciplinary composition described in the book have changed but are still clearly visible, and tracing this process across policy periods in different institutions, as well as different countries (e.g. Carpentier 2021), would likely prove fascinating.

An aspect of *Utopian Universities* which might be questioned is whether this period was, indeed, utopian. Utopia is often invoked in higher education literature, holding up a particular constituency's idealised model as a foil to marketisation (Baker 2020). Pellet and Taylor assert a utopia through these universities being new, state supported, looking to foster a cohesive learning community, and having their missions curtailed. There is little consideration as to whether these characteristics are in and of themselves ideal, though, and they could equally be applied to other university types. The model here was, as the book documents, that of a select group of well-placed, mostly Oxbridge-educated British men, many of whose names subsequently resurfaced as advisors on similar initiatives outside the UK. There was a widening of participation and employment opportunities but staff and students were predominantly male; it may have been progressive for its time, but diverse it was not. Social disadvantage and education are intertwined, and the selective grammar school system which supplied UK universities with students was actually entrenching educational inequalities (Gorard and Siddiqui 2018). The current position of higher education is not without its faults but it is arguably far more inclusive, and care should always be taken not to imagine any particular past as a mythical Golden Age (Tight 2010).

Utopian Universities also claims to be a 'Global History' of new 1960s universities, and it notes early on that some 200 institutions were built in this period, worldwide. It then refers to around 30, with a content ratio favouring the UK over the world by 2:1 and Global North to Global South by 8:1. The latter is 'represented' by two chapters: one on a single Indian university and another encompassing the Global South countries of the Commonwealth. It therefore reads as somewhat UK- and Eurocentric. Global North trends are well documented but there is too little to transfer those claims elsewhere, not least because the position of other countries varied widely, with many being economically disadvantaged and negotiating their own independence and national identity. The authors are aware of the geographic imbalance and suggest that widening the scope might have reduced depth, but arguably more could have been achieved by condensing some of the UK contributions to make room for other perspectives.

That *Non-University Higher Education* crosses several boundaries – theoretical, sectoral, and disciplinary – means that contributions can be discerned in each of them. Its greatest value is perhaps in what its conceptual framework achieves, simultaneously connecting national setting, locality, and personal identity. Much of its work on the student experience corroborates previous scholarship in relation to inequalities (Richardson 2015; Crozier et al. 2019) and/or policy (Macfarlane and Tomlinson 2017; Tomlinson 2017) but incorporating all three levels while doing justice to each avoids placing too much respective weight on social or political structures, parochialism, or individualism. The framework involves a combination of approaches, each of which is well established and widely applied in its own right, if not always in higher education research. There was a danger here of mixing metaphors by combining concepts in an unwieldy and/or ontologically incoherent model. Bonding place and space, possible selves, and narrative educational subjectivity, is ambitious but it works because it is painstakingly developed, built in layers and then applied in stages before being combined at the end. There are times in the findings where it is not always clear where how claims were derived through the analytical framework, but overall it is enormously successful. As Henderson suggests, it offers a template that others could apply elsewhere; the campuses of *Utopian Universities* would be prime candidates. Even if not applied exactly, *Non-University Higher Education* shows that it can be done, and effectively.

In terms of specific literatures, *Non-University Higher Education* students are, as Henderson notes, peripheral in status terms, but they have also been neglected from a research perspective. This book therefore adds to the work accumulating there. Studies applying perspectives from Geography to universities are very much emergent, and this book connects with work on both mobility (Finn 2017a; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018) and belonging (Holton and Finn 2018) but the specific focus on locally embedded – rather than deficiently immobile – students adds something distinctive. Finally, there is very little work looking at how students (or staff) negotiate higher education spaces (Halsband 2005; Alzeer 2018; Samatar et al. 2021), and work in this vein offers significant scope for expansion, even – or particularly – in the light of pandemic-related developments.

Concluding Thoughts

In review, these books both take our understanding of higher education further. They cover considerable shared ground, addressing themes such as policy and broader socio-economic contexts, widening access and pedagogy, the lived experience of staff and students, and how the locations and physical characteristics of educational institutions and their wider environs play a role in this. While they address contrasting types of higher education institution at different points in time, there are explicit connections between *Utopian Universities* and *Non-University Higher Education* in that, firstly, the universities and colleges they describe represent a continuation of government moves to increase access to a university education. Secondly, the experience and status of non-university colleges can be, quite problematically, defined by staff and students as being deficiently different from the UK norm of a residential, high status, full time student experience that the 1960s universities to some extent embedded in the national discourse.

What Pellew and Taylor's *Utopian Universities* offers in particular is how universities in different countries, created as part of national responses to the perceived issues of the time, have some shared DNA while calling attention to their individuality by examining of their initial stories. It also allows us to see how many of the concerns of the day have remained or retained currency, such as student activism and free speech, and how universities face difficulties in times of economic and political turmoil.

Henderson's *Non-University Higher Education*, on the other hand, develops and successfully applies an in-depth model showing how we can, and indeed need to, think in richer ways about the local in terms of its longer history, and how its perceived and actual opportunities are understood and negotiated. In applying this model to a peripheral form of higher education provision, it tells us more about 'non-traditional' study, drawing attention to the fact that 'immobility' is not a lesser experience at all, simply a different one.

What these books emphasise, individually and particularly in combination, is that place in higher education matters, in different ways – to staff, to students, and to their locales. Furthermore, places must always be considered in the light of global and national, as well as regional and local, historical and current contexts. These books reiterate the point, as others have done (Douglass 2005), that within the grand narratives of wider trends, the higher education experience itself is always local and this requires our continued and/or renewed attention.

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