

One Podcast to Start Your Day

S1 E4: United Kingdom

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Alex Usher:

Hello everyone. Today's a special edition of One Podcast to Start Your Day. We're going overseas to the United Kingdom, and we're speaking to a group of people at a fantastic organization called Wonkhe that's WonkHE. It is the website to be watching if you want to keep up on the ins and outs of higher education in the United Kingdom. And with us today, we have David Kernohan, the acting editor at Wonkhe, as well as Jim Dickinson and Sunday Blake, both associate editors at WonkHE. Hello to all three of you. Well, it's been a big year, hasn't it? Um, the UK has had three prime ministers, five secretaries of state for education, and I think three ministers for higher education, if I've, if I've got that right. Did you actually get anything done this year as a country or did everyone just spend their time briefing up new ministers?

David Kernohan:

I did personally spend a lot of time in newspaper archives looking up exciting facts about this latest clutch of ministers every single time. A couple of reflections: Firstly, reshuffling - it used to be special. It used to be something that happened every three or four years, and it kind of meant something. So, I kind of feel like we've lost the magic with this level this level of change. Secondly, in it's been the same - - for those in Canada not watching it: it's been the same political party so it's been broadly speaking, the same kinds of people pushing the same kinds of policies. So even though at the top we've seen a large number of massive convulsions, and there's been a lot of speculation, especially as we'll get to about international students and that kind of thing. In practice, the direction of travel has been the same.

Alex Usher:

Yeah. Okay. and so let me, if I, and so if I can summarize that a bit: you know, you've got a government that is, you know, as you say, it's a single direction. and what would you say, Jim, are the key elements of that direction? I mean, what's the overriding agenda of a conservative government in its 13th year in office? I think 12th year, it's a long time, something like that.

Jim Dickinson:

Well, I mean, that is an interesting question. At the macro level, so at the kind of central government level, the Liz Truss Premiership effectively crashed the economy. So ultra-libertarian attempts at kind of stimulating growth by throwing all cautions to the wind in terms of level of borrowing. Markets went bananas and within hours it was pretty clear that at some point she would have to go. And then her rival from the summer who was rejected by the Conservative's membership eventually emerges as the new Prime Minister in favour of Rishi Sunak. Now, what that means at macro level is really the current agenda is spend as much as needs to be spent to get through the energy crisis that is currently hitting Europe in general and the UK very specifically and above all else, that means that no government department has got any money to spend, even if it wanted to spend anything. So, to the extent to which there's a government agenda, it's all that sort of stuff that doesn't cost any money. So things like, for example, in higher education, the culture war continue to be something the government is

pursuing because there's no money around other than to spend on getting people to, you know, have their heating on for an hour a day.

Alex Usher:

Um, okay, well, to switch from the one-hour heat to the one-hour hate. Maybe I can ask you Sunday, the free speech agenda that the government has, they have a bill in parliament right now, I think, which is almost through the House of Lords, if I'm not mistaken. What's that all about? Are there, are there significant differences between the free speech debate in England and, you know, sort of the way that free speech debates are playing out on US campuses, which I think some of our listeners might be more familiar with?

Sunday Blake:

I don't think that they're significantly different. I think you see a lot of the same sort of characters and commentators popping up on both sides. Obviously, there's different legislation involved, but this has been going on for, I would say this has been, well, I mean actually this has been going on for, are we in 2022? Like easily 50 years. It's just, it sort of gets, like, it never goes away. It just like bubbles up as something else. So for example, it's called a culture war at the moment, but like previously you would've been calling it like, they would've been like comments around like, like political correctness, right? So it's never like gone away, but it's always sort of been around and there's a lot of like Twitter accounts or like academics in the UK who've actually been tracking this for a really long time. Now, the issue that happens is with the freedom of speech bill is they're trying to look at issues around free speech. So things like guest speakers, student events, student union events, that sort of thing. But they're also looking at academic freedom and obviously the kind of, not confusion, but there's a lot of like issues around students who are sort of saying, "well, we don't want to listen to this person." You know? This is a group that we are sort of organizing. But, when it comes to things around academic freedom, obviously that person's employment rights come into it as well. So it becomes a bit of a complex issue because there's all these sort of different issues at play. And that's not forgetting that student unions are also subject to charity commission guidelines. So they also have to abide by things like the Equality Act. so yeah, lots and lots of different issues coming up to play, lots of different things that we're trying to detangle. The legislation is claiming to be able to solve these, at WonkHE as editors we're all bit more skeptical of that. Um, I'm sure my colleagues will say more about that skepticism.

Alex Usher:

I certainly seen a lot of articles from you which suggest that there are lots of potential unintended consequences here. David, I think that's mostly been your take on this, yes?

David Kernohan:

All of us have been going in deep with the analysis of the bill. Jim especially has written a lot about the impacts on students' union and the legislation of student's union. (Which in some smaller providers are literally a bunch of student volunteers that are just organizing occasional social events for students) are suddenly have a huge and quite scary legal responsibility to ensure the freedom of speech. It's been my contention from when the bill was drafted that aside from one clause on a statutory tort, which has proved increasingly controversial in the latter stages of the Lords scrutiny process, to the extent that I suspect it will be changed radically before we get to the report state next week, with the exception of that, I don't think there's anything in the bill that could not be done by the Secretary of State just issuing a request to the

to the regulator, the office for students, just to say, "oh, would you mind doing this and having these conditions and having a new member of your, of the board?" So, I think a lot of the value of the bill is actually totemic and is not so much that it will actually do anything or it will actually solve any immediate problems. And as tends to happen, it's starting to get stuff lumped onto it to address other problems in the sector as well. It's, it is really a bill that is seen to have passed to bolster the conservative credentials with the right-wing libertarian end of UK politics, I think is fair to say.

Alex Usher:

Yeah. Well, I would say anyone in Canada, in Ontario, in Alberta, where we've had issues of free speech in the last four years, there were, you know, the government issues a regulation. They haven't gone to, they haven't gone to legislation, Will know that it's the passage of that regulation that is the point, not any actual effect afterwards, right? It's just nothing happen afterwards. It's just, you can say you've done something. Let me ask you about one other thing. I guess it's in, in some people's views, it would be part of the culture wars, which is a whole issue of immigration and how international students have been caught in that discussion. Um...I mean...I can't put it any, uh, more bluntly than this: Everybody in Canada is really pleased that Suella Braverman is taking up where Theresa May left, left off in terms of directing students our way. But, why is your government so hostile to international students? And I mean, are they really going to go through with another round of this nonsense?

David Kernohan:

From a little context from me and then a bit of detail from Jim. For some reason in the UK, we have a supreme national issue with immigration. We think about it for reasons that I've never entirely understood the whole time. In international terms: we don't take in a great number of immigrants; we don't have a great problem with illegal immigration. In terms of our responsibilities: as a function in democracy and a member of free world, we are encouraged to take in immigration. In terms of the kind of activity, the kind of industry that happens in the UK: we actually benefit a lot from immigration. However, certain parts of the press, and certain parts of the government are really against this idea. It's a really strange little nativist kind of crease in an other words, largely tolerant and well-meaning country, I think it's fair to say. So, the issue with international students, Jim has actually just written a couple of great pieces on this, and it makes sense for him to tell you about.

Jim Dickinson:

Look, I mean, the thing about Brexit is that the two sides, you know. A massive issue in that decision was about immigration and the winning side kind of promised to control immigration in a way that, you know, predecessor governments kind of hadn't. And one of the things that's interesting, you know, last week's kind of economic figures, we've now got a million vacancies in the economy, so a really slow economy. A million vacancies in the economy which most people are putting down to the fact that we can't, kind of, get free movement or cheap labor from the rest of Europe. But at the same time, because the kind of winning side then kind of effectively took over, the Tory party got rid of Theresa May and so on, that kind of winning side is still pretty immigration suspicious. So, it plays really well to the people who kind of got in the end kind of "will keep Richie Sunna where he is to be very, very hostile on immigration" and, and one of the things that, that therefore means is that even though probably somewhere deep in the treasury, people are thinking it's actually not unhelpful for there to be a significant number of international students who might in the end, end up on a kind of immigration, you know, a kind of skilled migration route to fill some of those vacancies. They can't say it out loud because

what politicians have to say out loud is, “no, no, no, no, no, we must control the number of immigrants.” And the reality is in a country where you got 60 million as a population, half a million net migration in the year, to the end of June, 2022 does feel like a lot, but there's something else going on that is really, really interesting. So, I sat and looked at the last quarter's immigration figures this morning, and if you look at the number of dependents, that's partners or kids that a Chinese student brings in, if you round that down to within two decimal points, it's zero. Okay? I then looked at that number for Nigerian students and it's north 0.9. And the reality is that in a housing market that's significantly contracting, partly because of interest rates shooting up, no one has planned to build any family accommodation. The private providers haven't built any, the private rental market hasn't got any in the big towns and cities or the university cities and towns of the UK. So, we've got this massive student accommodation crisis for students from the biggest growth country, which is Nigeria, and again, no one wants to talk about that in the sector because they worry that that it will encourage the government to clamp down on the number of international students. So, you've got this inability to have a sensible conversation about immigration that makes it really difficult then to talk about nuances or numbers or markets or regulation or basically anything.

Alex Usher:

Yeah, it's interesting because we have that same housing crunch in Canada, but we just don't talk about students in that sector. It just doesn't come up right. So, bring in more! I'm not sure that's so... I think we might win on openness, but not necessarily on honesty of political discussion, if I can put it that way.

Sunday Blake:

One of the things that's very difficult in the sector is that this is a sector that's sort of been governed in relatively free market terms. I say it relatively because there's a lot of regulations as well. But when it comes to issues like housing, the conversations that I've had and the complacency that I've seen is that it's supply and demand. So international students will come and then private companies will build houses for them, and that's fine, right? But what we've seen this year, and Jim's written about on the site, is that there are hundreds, possibly thousands, well, hundreds, I think at least in the hundreds of families living in AirBnBs. Now, where this creates more tension is that where you would normally have, and Jim made a really good point about this on the site the other day, where he was saying that the average age of undergraduates has gone down in the UK while the average age to have a child has gone up. So, we are based on a system in the UK where we are not expecting undergraduates to have children, right? We're not expecting, we haven't built student housing for them, you know, that sort of thing. But what happens is then you have international students moving into local housing stock, right? And when there's, and there's a scarcity of housing, because it's not just a student housing crisis. We talk about it in effect of the student housing crisis. We know this throughout history when there's scarcity, people panic, they buy into populous narratives, they buy into nationalist narratives, that sort of thing. So, but again, this has come back to the fact that what we have is a sector that is constantly playing catch up with the needs of students because they're not sitting down and risk assessing the needs of those students before they arrive.

Alex Usher:

Got it. The next couple questions I'm going to ask are going to be insight baseball, you have an office for students and it had a consultation on baseline outcomes this year. What is the office for students and, what are these baseline outcomes meant to achieve?

David Kernohan:

The Office for Students is the national regulator of higher education in England. It has something of the region of 410 registered providers of higher education. And as part of doing what it does, it sets a number of expectations of all what these providers should really be doing. The kind of expectations it's been setting in terms of quality at the moment has not been focused as it has been in previous years on the input measures - so looking at the actual quality of teaching or looking at what actually happens in lecture theater or seminar room - but it has been looking at outputs. So, the number of students that continue on their course, the number of students that complete their course, and the number of students that get a good graduate job afterwards. The thresholds that consulted on and then set are, well, what it feels to be the minimum proportion of students in all kinds of different groups that would achieve a good outcome would continue with their course and would complete their course. It can look at these at a whole institutional level, but it is more focused on looking at particular groups of students. So, I mean rather than thinking, say, "is the university of Sheffield say a good university?" It would say "are full-time undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds at Sheffield getting a good experience in such that they continue in their course?" and in that example, I'm almost certain that yes, they're above the threshold and they probably do. And if a provider falls underneath those thresholds, there's been a lot of talk in the UK that it's some kind of determinant computerized system in which if you're under the threshold, you get the bad hammer, and if you are not under the threshold, you're fine. In practice, the Office of Students says it will be taking the context into account. There's a lovely classic example of, there's a higher education provider called Norland College, which trains really, really, really posh nannies that get incredibly well-paid jobs. Mary Poppins. Except every time we mention Mary Poppins in conjunction with their name, they're not happy, so I try not to do these days. but that's the kind of thing we're looking at. If it's any idea, Boris Johnson and his family had a Norland College nanny, that's the kind of level we're talking at. They're obviously, they're signing onto this course they're getting the outcome that they deserve, but because childcare is not seen as a skilled graduate job, it looks like they are the worst in the sector for outcomes on pretty much any measure that you go for. So, the Office of Students to its credit says, "okay, we will be taking that context into account," which is lovely, but they're not telling us how they're going to do that. I'd quite like to know, I think.

Alex Usher:

But you've been through this already before, right? I mean, the whole Teaching Evaluation Framework, the whole point was, is that there was, it wasn't just numbers, they were supposed to take context into account. I mean, you've had this discussion about numbers versus context for a while. No? Is there no resolution here?

David Kernohan:

We have, but you mentioned the Teaching Excellence Framework, the TEF, that's a different thing in that the thresholds [in the outcomes] are looking at performance that is right at the bottom of what might be considered acceptable. The TEF is supposed to look at the performance at the other end. It's supposed to encourage and foster excellence by handing out medals.

Jim Dickinson:

The thing is though about this, right? I mean, look, think about this here. The government's position would be, "look, we subsidize student loans and, you know, we don't want the students

who kind of give up that kind of time and, you know, a lifetime of repayments to, to be done over". So, you know, if there's a provider on the registry saying, "come on, you know, improve your life, get a graduate job," and so on and the reality is that only 3% of them end up in a graduate job, the government is saying, well, they're ought to be minimums. The problem of course, is that we know that the students that are least likely to get to the second year of an undergraduate course, the students least likely to complete, and the students least likely to get a graduate job is all based on their social background. So, in other words, its riskier always to admit and teach those students. And really what the Office for Students via the government is saying is there's a limit to the extent to which we will take risks on those people. And to the extent to which a provider wants to take risks on them, they've got to kind of take all of the risk. And so, you know, if you're a university that is traditionally taking those sorts of students, that's a lot more responsibility on your shoulders to work out whether a student will make it and you are having to make some moral judgments rather than say, the Oxford in Cambridge or our elite Russell group who broadly aren't really taking many risks at all in terms of those stats, you know?

Alex Usher:

Um, okay. So that brings me to my next set of questions because the government has also talked about reinstating what is called student number controls. Now, again, this is not something we have in Canada. Each institution decides its own enrollment levels and therefore the level of risks that it takes as you put it. As I understand it, one of the ways the government is talking about reducing its costs is by just saying, we're not going to take as many students. And that's sort of centralized number controls. How's that debate going in the last 12 months?

David Kernohan:

Yeah, that is a debate and it's one that a number of articles on WonkHE have played a part in. So, the idea a student number controls is not necessarily about setting a centralized cap on the number of students. It is taking a look in much the same way as the Office the Students do as regards, quality and thinking, "okay, if we pump in loads and loads of students here and a particular university's struggling as regards to resources as regards to staffing, those students are not going to have a good experience so that, so therefore is it a really good thing to spend public money on their education?" So, skipping over a lot of insight baseball stuff here. There are some within higher education that are completely opposed to the idea of any number controls at all, of any sort whatsoever at any point. It's like an absolute red line this then. And there are others that think: look, we are looking at spaces where we've got classes that we can't actually fit all in the same lecture theater at the same time, we've got classes where we've not got enough staff to probably teach the students, we've got students that are complaining about having a bad experience. Do we need to look at that before we need before we expand those courses any further? I mean, I don't know whether any of my colleagues want to come in at this point because it's not something in which we've got a corporate line on. It's not something in which we can do like a wonkHE says kind of a thing. It's a live issue and it is one that is still in the middle of the debate, I think rather than at the end of it.

Alex Usher:

Sunday, what's your take?

Sunday Blake:

I think the concern that I've always had around student number controls is that which students is it that are going not access education? Do we have percentages of state schools and private educated students within the designated number cap? Like, is that, is that how we do it? Like how is it that? Going on the concerns that Jim has raised as well around certain students from certain backgrounds, sort of statistically having not as good outcomes, my concern is that when we start enforcing number caps, it basically means that there are certain groups of students that will then not access university. I think what DK was saying about the subjects which they're saying, you know, you have to get this, this certain grading before you access finance to go to university, some of these subjects are completely irrelevant to the discipline that that student wants to study or is arguably irrelevant. So again, it comes back down to this sort of like very narrow version of what university should look like, what subjects students should be familiarized in before they arrive, and also what background those students should come from. That's everything that as a sector we've been trying to work, you know, to go away from we've trying to widen the sector, diversify the sector

Alex Usher:

And you're from a students' union background, right? So this, this obviously matters to you.

Sunday Blake:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I am. I would hope it would matter to anyone who's in higher education regardless.

Alex Usher:

I hear you. I hear you. So, listen, the one thing that everybody or I would say one of the things that the UK is most famous for in the world of higher education is an incredibly heavy-handed way of looking at research. That is the REF, used to be called the REE, but the Research Excellence Framework, I think it's a fascinating way to think about quality and measure quality, but, it does certainly take a lot of time and produces an enormous amount of griping from what I can tell. And yet, you do it every six years, seven years, I think, and, and the results don't change that much from year to year is my impression. And that's, you know, it's like what we see in rankings. Rankings don't change much year-to-year, you know, from exercise-to-exercise. So why do you keep doing? This year you had another or I guess it was last year, 2021, but the results were released this year. What was different about this REF if anything, did you learn something new about the sector?

David Kernohan:

So, I think we need a little bit of background on the REF there to start with. So, this is every six or seven years we look at as a nation, we get together a sample of the kinds of research outputs that are coming out at universities in particular subject areas. These are reviewed by academic peers. We don't use citation metrics, we don't look at journal impact factors, nothing like that. It is literally old school academics looking at academic work and seeing what they make of it. These ratings are primarily used to direct what's called quality related research funding. The UK has something called a dual stream approach to research funding in which a big chunk of it flows through particular projects. Like I would ask a bunch of researchers to research a particular thing that they've bid to do, and then at the end of that I stop funding them. And then you have the QR stuff, which is just basically "you seem to be good at research here, have some money, go and do something interesting with it". It's the QR stuff that supports the capacity of the system. If you just had the project funding, that would mean that you'd have a project and

then it would stop and departments would collapse and then you couldn't bring them back to do any more research later. So, in this year's REF, the REF 2021, we made some big methodological changes. The consensus was building that the REF was particularly subject to gameplay. It used to be that you only submitted research from a certain proportion of staff and everybody would choose the absolute best staff they could get. There was a little research transfer market so they could get people in for the deadline and they could say, okay, they did this research here, so therefore we are great. The changes were that every single academic that's had any responsibility for research had a piece of their work assessed, a part of that subject area in that institution. And the transfer market was no longer possible because the outputs that a researcher made would be assigned, both to the place they used to be and the place that they had moved to. What you tend to see in the REF is what we like to call pockets of excellence. You see a great little research institute in a provider that you might not necessarily expect to be strong in that area and then that institute attracts funding to the institution that the institution can spend however it likes in improving its research or anything else it needs to do. It is an incredibly, like it's, I said at the top it is, um, a belt and braces system. It is hard, particularly on research managers. They really struggle with all of the rules, but a lot of the complaints you see are, I would say they're based on the mythology of the REF rather than the actual ref as it's experienced.

Alex Usher:

But I'm fascinated by this idea that you can have a massive change in methodology, David, which you explained just a second ago, and I don't think there was a huge change in how people were rated. So, what does that tell you about various methodologies in rating research?

David Kernohan:

The fact that we are not seeing a massive change, I spend a lot of my time for my sins talking to League Table compilers, and there is a live discussion in that world about the amount of movement that you'd expect to see in a league table if it was going to look credible over a long term. So, say if I started, a league table and then one year Cambridge was at the top, and next year Anglia Ruskin University was at the top and Cambridge was at the bottom, it wouldn't look particularly credible cause it's moving really fast. So, I think what's fascinating with the REF is even though we changed the methodology, we saw a similar result, which suggests to me that the REF is a reasonably good way of understanding whatever it is that the REF measures. If the REF actually measures the quality of research, which I think it's fair to assume, it kind of does, that's liable to be capacity that is built up over a number of years. You don't just subtly turn around one day and decide, "I'm going to be really great at researching engineering". You've got to build that reputation, you've got to bring in projects, you've got to bring in researchers, but then eventually you're going to be good. And even if you stop being quite this cutting edge, you're still going to be pretty good for quite a long while after that. And actually, while I'm on, I just need to very quickly pull Jim up on something that he said. The funding the institutions get for the REF is not hypothecated to the department that actually had the good scores. So, if you're a vice chancellor, you've got a great research department in English, you can take all of the money that that department has won and you can allocate it to psychology and there's not a damn thing anyone can do about it. It is money that goes to the university for the overall research that the university rather than being hypothecated to a particular department. Apologies, Jim.

Alex Usher:

Got it. Last, last question here for any of you. One thing our two countries share is a a fascination among the policy classes with, DARPA, that's the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. We came close to having one this year and then pulled back and decided to try something different. You've actually gone through with this, I mean, this is one of Dominic Cummings big ideas right back from when he was government before doing tourism whilst in COVID. What's, what's the experience of your of, I've forgotten what it's called now, actually, I'm, I'm blanking, but you have one of these,

David Kernohan:

It called APA.

Alex Usher:

You go. That's simple. Okay, so what's the experience so far?

David Kernohan:

It's called ARIA. I'm very, very sorry. The Advanced Research and Invention Agency. It's done nothing so far. It's been done nothing whatsoever. It's got a budget of 800 million pounds over five years. It has appointed a chair and a chief exec who I would describe as being from the startup scene, shall we say. They are tech bros in the fullest sense of the world as far as I can tell. They've been advertising jobs, that they've been not appointing people and they've been just kind of randomly wondering around universities and talking to people about anything that comes into their minds because of the charming and incredibly well considered way that the legislation has been set up. We can't actually abolish it for the next decade. So, it's just going to sit there, it's just going to do something. Maybe it'll do something interesting, maybe it'll do nothing whatsoever. We have almost no control over it and we have almost no way of knowing.

Alex Usher:

Interesting. Let me ask all of you very quickly, just before we end. Sunday: 2022, what are you going to remember about this year? What's the higher education story of the year?

Sunday Blake:

I mean for me, this is not nice, but I think for me it's the Suella Braverman coming out swinging against international students. Not just because of that in itself, but because of all the, all the conversations that it's initiated since I think, for me, the sector had a, a reasonable, but in my opinion, disappointing response because the main sort of cacophony of voices was that, "well, international students bring billions of pounds into the economy and therefore that's, you know, we should carry on inviting them here." And actually, from my perspective, international internationalization of our campuses brings a lot more than just income. Obviously, these institutions are dependent on the income as well, but yeah, I thought there was a lot of benefits that were missed out of that conversation. So I'd say that's, that was probably one thing that's going to stay in my mind is that as a community, we haven't quite yet learned how to articulate how good it is to have an internationally diverse campus and I hope that in 2023 we can learn to articulate that.

Alex Usher:

Fantastic. Jim, what's your story of 2022?

Jim Dickinson:

We've moved from pandemic to a massive cost of living crisis and literally every other group of people in society have had some financial support except students. And in fact, the only thing the Westminster government has done for students is relatively quietly change the terms and conditions of the student loans they took out. So, they'll end up paying more back across the course of their lifetime. At some point when the conservatives find it really difficult to get back into power because they've neglected young people, this is one of the years that people will be quoting as the source of really, really long-term dissatisfaction.

Alex Usher:

Hmm. David's story of 2022.

David Kernohan:

Obviously not as like earth shattering as either of those two, which probably would both have been my choices, but I'll come up with something else: The Quality Assurance Agency, the independent academic led body that assures the quality and standards of higher education in England, literally walked away from its role because it and was unable to work with our regulator at the Office of Students and continue to meet the standards expected of it as an international quality assurance agency. The fact that we have moved so far from international norms in thinking about the quality of higher education and the fact that absolutely nobody has talked about this or incredibly few people have talked about this. I think that is another one that will stick in my mind.

Alex Usher:

Fantastic. Listen, thank you all so much. I really appreciate your time. It's been great. We've been talking with, uh, Jim Dickinson, Sunday Blake, and David Kernohan, all from the fantastic website Wonkhe. Thank you all very much. And guys here's hoping for a better 2023.

David Kernohan:

Thanks Alex. It's been good to be on.