

# The Future

What's coming for HE and how should Kent Union respond?

JIM DICKINSON, WONKHE SUs



**WONKHE**  
SU<sub>s</sub>

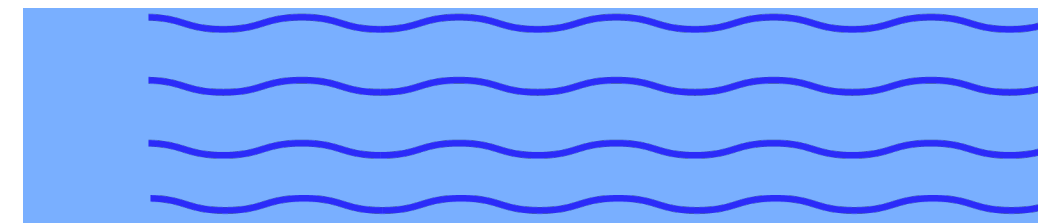
# Strategy

- Boards and the “long term”

But:

- **Volatile:** quick actions needed to events outside your control
- **Uncertain:** future unclear and non- predictable
- **Complex:** Dynamic networks with confusing/conflicting relationships
- **Ambiguous:** Action without certainty of outcome



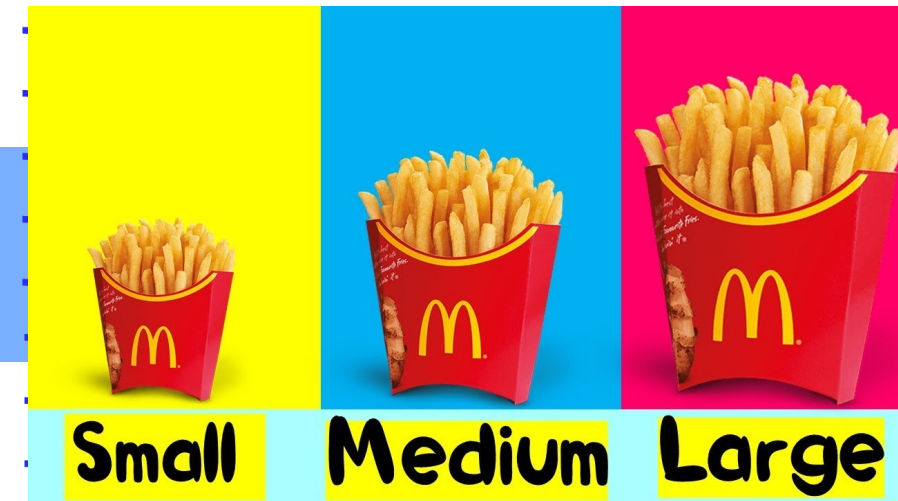




# It's the medium that matters

When the pressure is on and the environment is chaotic or uncertain, leaders tend towards:

- **Small issues:** Micro management, generates feelings of control. But what about the big picture?
- **Huge issues:** Collective, long term things that need attention, **but...**
- Also a way of avoiding accountability over the “hard” stuff – **medium** issues that require the most attention, response and decision



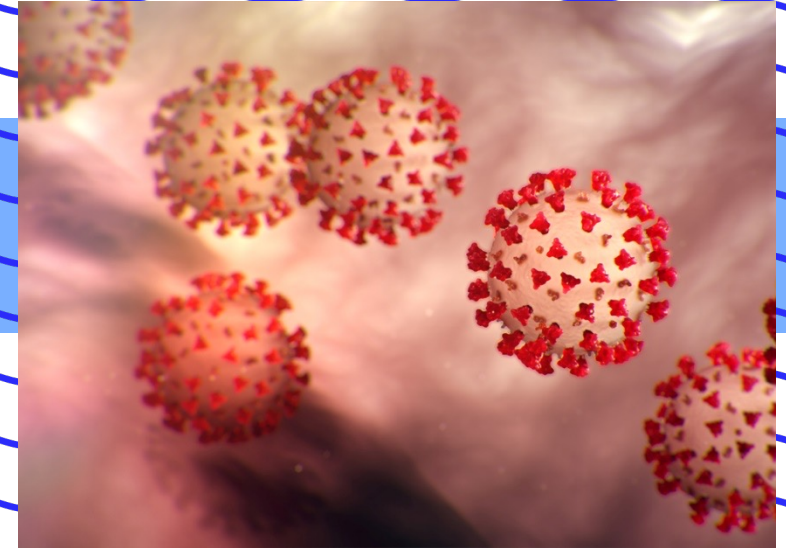






# And now the problem is

- Nobody has done this before
- Higher education is highly “mimetic” and generally conservative
- VUCA requires all sorts of skills and smarts that have not previously been necessary or even desirable
- Previous focus on incremental performance rather than innovation
- And everyone’s understaffed and knackered and scared and cold and stressed and...



# Everything is changing

- Science and technology
- Values
- Demography
- Environment
- Geography
- Social structures



# Everything is getting worse

- Environment degrading
- Morals in disarray
- Family collapsing
- Culture dumbing down
- Politics by media sound bite
- Democracy corrupted
- War always on the horizon
- Globalisation = a gale of disorder





# Everything is getting better

- People living much longer lives
- Democratic cultures spread by media, Internet
- World more interconnected
- Education spreading
- Position of women improving, somewhat
- Technological innovation critical to environment
- Asia: tens of millions lifted from poverty every year



# Change

- Private optimism, about our lives, families
- Public pessimism about the state of the world
- The two come together in organisations
- Organisations provide people with a sense of private identity
- But critical to how we cope with the world together



# Responding to change

	Confrontation	Retreat
Radical	Anti Globalisation Students, ethnic minorities Left populism	New age Downshifting
Reactionary	Rural protests Right national populism: Europe	Melancholy Nostalgia

# Responding to change

	Confrontation	Retreat
Radical	Adapt entrepreneurially Create new business models Very risky	As long as what I do doesn't change I don't mind what is going on around me
Reactionary	Get back to basics but with a vengeance, cut costs, streamline Very tough	Do you remember the old days when things were so much better?



# Organisations of change

- Adaptive, nimble, agile organisations able to learn fast about environment around them, sense opportunities and mobilise resources to exploit them
- But organisations that just do that would be in perpetual turmoil, constantly reinventing themselves
- So as well as being adaptive, nimble and agile organisations need to have a sense of stability, continuity and purpose
- But a sense of stability that does not inhibit ability to adapt
- What does that optimum mix of stability and flux come from?
- **It comes from challenging conventional wisdom**

# What is a students' union?

- Some students on committees
- Some clubs and societies
- Some facilities





# Change

- The received wisdom says that change in our sector or organisations will come from elected officers.
- This is not automatic.
- Officers are wedded to the traditional system because they were successful in it, elections don't provide debate about it and because staff induct officers (not the other way around).
- This is a big lie we tell ourselves and the result is a deeply conservative environment.



# Austerity

- Treasury (as of today) reverting to austerity of 2010s.
- Less fat to cut and higher education can't escape through a loan trick any more

Four options:

- Fewer students go to university
- Graduates pay more back through the loan scheme (inc existing graduates)
- Reduced academic delivery costs
- Reduced maintenance costs





# Politics

- Hostile to universities, young, diversity, “culture wars” and other SU hobby horses and values
- Highly unstable – risk taking in wrong direction swings to deep freezes (and both fiscal and policy drag)
- Unable to address contemporary issues of the day (social media and impacts on political debate and harassment, housing crisis etc)
- Essay crisis culture – wait til very bad and throw plasters and money
- Coping mechanisms become features



# Students

- More of them
- More diverse
- Less time
- More anxious
- More collaborative (yet)
- Lonely
- Busy and less “immersed”





# Outcomes

- Continuation, Completion and Progression
- Plus others (learning gain, confidence)
- Why are the numbers the way they are?
- Coverage at course level





# Belonging

- Size and diversity of courses
- Identity and social capital
  - Housing
  - Hobbies
  - Characteristics
  - Subject/Course?
- Intervening at course level but retaining student led approach?





# Activities model

- Clubs and societies dominate
- Projects
- Initiatives
- Events
- Festivals
- Services
- Social enterprises
- Sprints



# Employment

- Work experience
- Application
- Appraisal
- Supervision and management





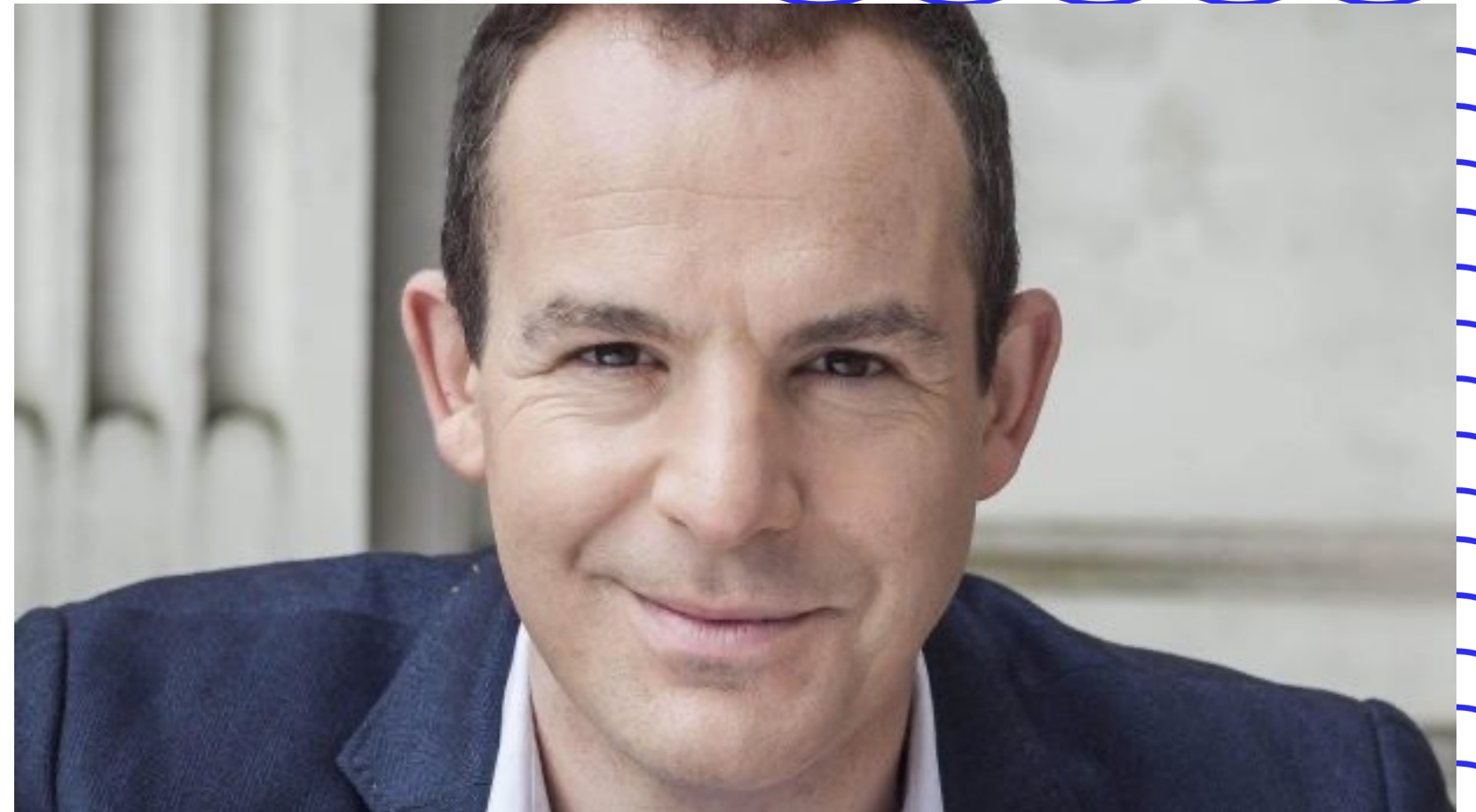
# Diversity

- Integration not assimilation
- Single points of failure
- Infrastructure v behaviour
- Risks to equality of opportunity
- Community deveopment



# Rights

- TikTok
- Martin Lewis
- International development
- Minimums and entitlements
- Power



# Influencing

- SUs as campaigning organisations v influencing organisations
- Evaluation v voice
- Representation v policy
- Handling and influencing complexity
- Influencing the “whole” university
- Elected? Celebrity (overloaded) sabs?





# National collaboration

- NUS as a vehicle?
- Shared costs?
- Shared expertise and professionals as collab, more amateurs locally



**national union of students**

# Staffing

- Coordinators and recruitment models
- Structures – commercial, membership services (advice, opportunities, voice)
- What if the structures were radically different – and involved (far) fewer career staff
- The Barista problem – but leadership distribution?
- Civil service v professionals in roles



# Governance

- Centrally run governance (sabbs + board) with clubs and societies
- Associations and governance in a group?
- Are there potentially hundreds of opportunities to govern an SU
- Does every part need the same plan, same type of objectives, same cycle of decision making
- What if the SU had to be broken up?
- What if more students had more responsibility





# What kind of board?

- 1. Rowing:** Close scrutiny and decision making over particular (or all) aspects of the organisation
- 2. Diving:** Largely hands off, but dives when there is a crisis or an issue of interest
- 3. Poking:** Managers run the SU, officers lead the “politics”, board asks tricky questions of former
- 4. Steering:** Board enables work to happen

# What kind of organisation(s)?

- We do things **for people** – they're in need or in crisis and there are risks
- We offer things **to people** – we know what they want and deliver it
- We do things **with people** – we help people to achieve the things they want to achieve
- We provide things that enable people to do things **for themselves**

# What kind of organisation?

- **Charity:** Beneficiaries, classic strategic plan, competing interests resolved at Board
  - **Mutual:** Student led with little input from externals other than advice and scrutiny
  - **Binary:** Political structures do X, corporate governance structures do Y, some crossover
  - **Group:** Looks after fundamentals and a spine, but develops (student led) governance throughout a group
- (and – how commercial?)



# Level of control

- **Granular:** Regular meetings, performance measures for everything
- **Aloof:** Sets loose strategy, receives reports, offers some challenge, but almost completely hands-off
- **Annual:** Dives on a regular, calendar basis. Approves 1 year plan but 3 year ambitions.
- **Active:** Adopts different behaviours for different goals or areas of the organisation depending on risk and development

# Measures

- Measures that **demonstrate to stakeholders** that you are doing good things, well, and VFM
- Measures that **inspire and drive performance** of your key staff
- Measures that tell you how the **managers are performing**
- Measures that demonstrate that you are **solving problems and achieving things**
- Measures of inputs? Outputs? Outcomes? Impacts?

# What are you planning?

- The **development of the organisation** – infrastructure, finances, people, services
- The **improvement of the student experience** – their situation, rights, attainment etc
- To **solve particular problems** – with ideas or services or projects or campaigns
- To **involve and engage** – as a marker of legitimacy
- To improve students' **education through their participation**



# SU strategy

- Dominant model is over infrastructure and participation
- What about the student interest?
- Student interest issues as outputs
- Representational outcomes?
- Capacity to respond on representational outcomes?

# The Future

What's coming for HE and how should Kent Union respond?

JIM DICKINSON, WONKHE SUs



**WONKHE**  
SU<sub>s</sub>