

The Future

What's coming for HE and how
should SUs respond?

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WONKHE
SUs

CEOs and 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



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**

But what if the world is VUCA?



Context: Austerity

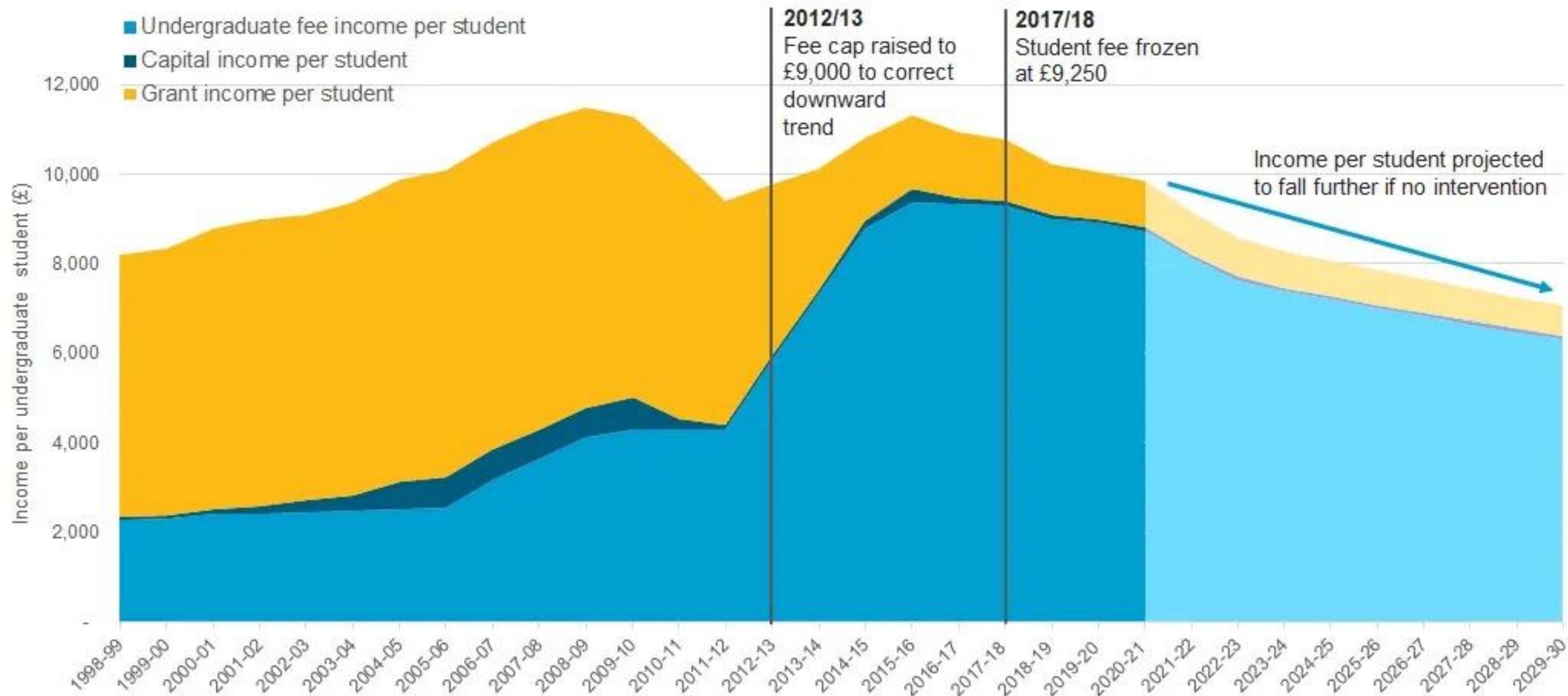
- Treasury (as of today) reverting to austerity of 2010s.
- Less fat to cut and higher education can't escape through a loan trick any more

Four options:

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

What if the block grant halved tomorrow?





Context: 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

What if students had to opt in/join for a fee?



Context: Students

- More of them
- More diverse
- Less time
- More anxious
- More collaborative (yet)
- More monitored
- Lonely
- Busy and less “immersed”
- Less able to make mistakes

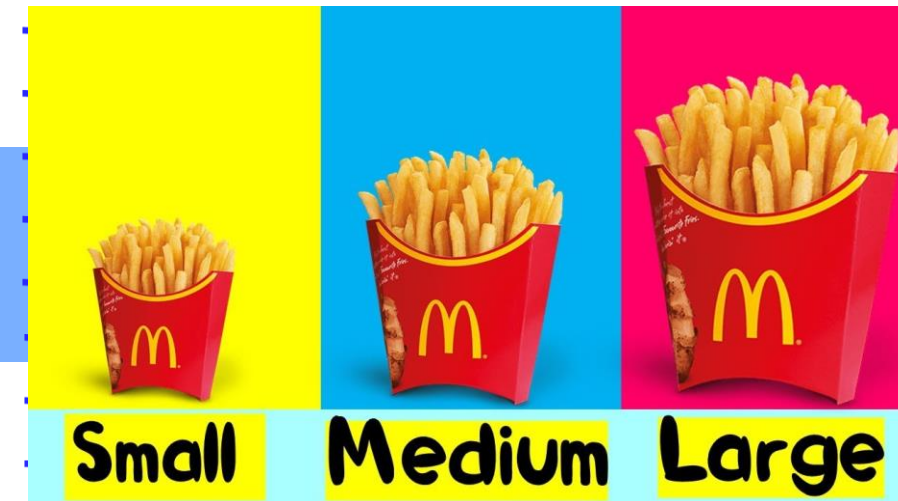
What we know about their lives v what we know about their views



It's the medium that matters

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

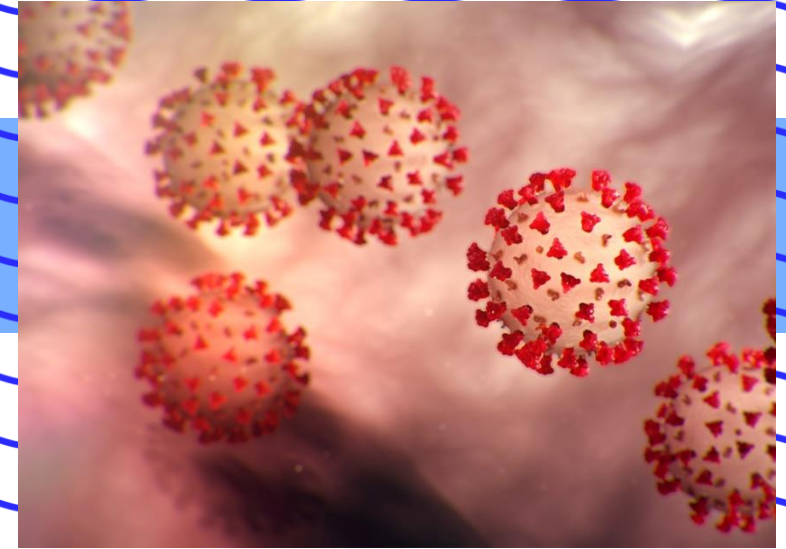
- **Small issues:** Micro management, generates feelings of control. But what about the big picture?
- **Huge issues:** Collective, long term things that fo need attention, **but...**
- Also a way of avoiding accountability over the “hard” stuff – **medium** issues that require the most attention, response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





And now the problem is

- Nobody has done this before
- Higher education is highly “mimetic” and generally conservative
- So are SUs
- 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...



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.



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**Innovation and R&D in the
voluntary sector is (almost) non
existent**

**What if 20% of leadership time
was on asking creative questions,
generating ideas, piloting new
approaches, challenging existing
models etc?**

WONKHE

1. The immersion model

- How far away are students living?
- How busy (and burdened) are students?
- Are they able to “deliver” the student experience in the same way?
- Are they able to benefit from the student experience in the same way
- How much should SUs play the ball where it lies, or resist to prevent a new normal?

What do we know about their lives and what they want from the uni experience?



What is a students' union?

Minimum viable product?

- Some students on committees
- Some clubs and societies
- Independent advocacy
- Reps across the university?



2. The functional model

- Defence – what is important, eye catching, promised, and emotionally invested in
- Offense
 - What is valuable from a DOT POV (saving money, understanding outcomes, improving outcomes)
 - Ownership roots
 - Strategy to kill and take over shadow voice operations – what has driven their creation?
 - Tackling opportunity overload



3. The advocacy model

- Assumes voice dept to support reps to improve education
- Assumes advice dept to support students when in crisis
- Assumes student leadership model based on FT functions and PT identities
- International students and academic misconduct – does the model work?
- Disabled students and reasonable adjustments – does the model work?
- Nursing students and interests – does the model work?



3. The advocacy model

- Assumes a series of professional functions. But:
Eg community of students from India
- Rep model assumes a kind of assertiveness
- Funding model assumes certainty in delivery
- Social model assumes homogeneity
- Advice model assumes crisis support is enough

What if you had two coordinators (or 5 student staff) who just did stuff for Indian students

Activities, advocacy, study skills, immigration , advice, voice work

4. The democratic model

- Assumes single, homogenous community with single points of focus and failure
- Village, town, city
- What is happening within the large (and free standing) communities?
- What if winners represent weighing of community size?
- Is it possible or wise to operate structures where one of the large communities can lose?

What if the sabbs were selected from a council of 100?



5. Student leadership model

- Individuals matter (rather than bodies, groups and functions)
- Elections matter (rather than selection by the elected)
- Self-care and quality the enemy of university size and complexity
- Laziness of “stick a sabb on it”

What if sabbs were not allowed to sit on university committees?

6. Representation model

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

What if everyone could be the course rep?



7. Belonging model

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

What if your #1 metric was belonging?
(School plays)



8. Activities model

Clubs and societies dominate. But:

- Projects
- Initiatives
- Events
- Festivals
- Services
- Social enterprises
- Sprints

What if the “club” or “soc” was banned?



9. The commercial model

1. Each venue or outlet will be run and governed as a student led social enterprise
2. We will be run efficiently, to a high standard, and generate a healthy surplus that can be ploughed back into the union
3. We will employ a high number of student staff who are paid well and gain valuable experience at all levels of our business
4. We will be an exemplar in relation to safety, security, responsible retailing and ethical practices and purchasing
5. In our programming and product ranges we will seek to meet the widest possible range of students' needs, we will focus on minorities as well as majorities, and we will provide a platform for student talent to shine



10. The employment model

10-15 hours during reasonable hours is good. Rest is bad.

- Work experience
- Application
- Appraisal
- Supervision and management

What if the goal was full and good and educational employment?



11. Rights

- Model assumes an intervention late on and benign actors
- TikTok
- Martin Lewis
- International development
- Minimums and entitlements
- Power

What if the metric was solving on-course annoyances?



12. Influencing

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

What if representation, campaigning or voice was abolished and the goal was influence?



13. The collaboration model

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

What if you weren't allowed to employ non-student facing expertise?

14. The staffing model

- Labour market pressures continue
- Coordinators, pyramids 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

What if there was a career staff freeze for 12 months



Basic model...

- Expert staff who have a general understanding of students
- Multidisciplinary staff who have an expert understanding of groups of students
- Schools? Countries?



15. The Brand Model

- Why is there a single brand?
- Can students own it, play with it, use it?
- **What if there were multiple brands with multiple student leaders?**



16. The governance model



- Centrally run governance (sabbs + board) with clubs and societies
- Associations and governance in a group?
- Why does every function share performance management and governance assumptions?
- 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 more students had more responsibility

What if the SU had to be broken up?

17. The resourcing model

- Membership fees for some of brands?
- Alumni staffing and support
- Legacy fundraising
- Location based activities and shared infrastructure
- Town centres?

**What if you had to find money and re
from outside of uni grant?**



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