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The Role of Universities and HEIs in the Vulnerability Agenda

Joyce Liddle
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We dedicate this short pivot to all the vulnerable individuals and groups across the world, in the hope that it may go some way towards raising the issue of this important and growing topic. We trust that it not only stimulates further research in the field, but also catches the attention of academics, practitioners, and policy makers concerned with vulnerability, in all its forms

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract In this introductory chapter, we provide a rationale and set the parameters for the chapters to follow. We stress how this book fills a gap in knowledge and understanding of the importance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (universities) as key Anchor institutions and Place leaders in response to vulnerability issues within broader societal changes. This introductory chapter shows how merging scholarship from multi-disciplinary fields of enquiry and drawing lessons from other fields, the authors are able to build on past research on vulnerability, but within changing multi-level governance contexts and dynamic policy frameworks. Setting the scene for subsequent chapters, the vulnerability agenda is examined within existing policies for equality, diversity, inclusion, and in this respect, we argue that universities have been at the forefront of developing evidence of good practice. We highlight the evolution of HEI (Universities) as enduring institutions afforded high levels of social trust to achieve public good, and despite neo-liberal reforms, there are convincing empirical, practical, theoretical, and policy insights to reveal how universities are preparing for an escalation in vulnerability and developing corporate strategies to ameliorate existing economic and social inequalities.

Keywords Universities • Vulnerability • Politics • Pandemic • Brexit

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This book addresses an important gap in knowledge because although the issue of vulnerability is a multi-disciplinary concept that spans different intellectual fields, and debates surrounding it are increasingly taking centre stage in intellectual, policy, and practice circles. We provide a new perspective, merging the scholarship of authors from public management and policing/social policy backgrounds to examine how, and why universities are engaged in the vulnerability agenda. Current and past discussions on the topic were traditionally located in the realms of policing, social work, or other professional networks, but increasingly, the concept has been entering the mainstream public policy and management realms (Addidle & Liddle, 2020). There is already a well-established literature on the role and purpose of universities, university-community relations, and latterly, an evolving body of work on universities as place leaders for economic and social sustainability. The contents of this book bring a fresh dimension by drawing on a myriad of different perspectives within the social sciences to add to our understanding on how universities can extend their responsibilities in fulfilling 'public good' by responding to vulnerability in a variety of different ways.

The chapters also need to be set within the broader context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, OECD (2018), World Bank, World Health Organisation, and EU Policies on the importance of universities in driving regional economic, social, and environmental development, as well as the UK Research Councils' Grand Challenges for improving people's lives and a country's productivity. Moreover, it is generally agreed that the repercussions from Brexit negotiations and the COVID 19 pandemic have potential to exacerbate existing inequalities in UK society and create even greater levels of vulnerability by revealing an even sharper decline in social conditions within some of the poorer communities. Many communities across the UK have still not recovered from the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, and in some cases, are still reeling from de-industrialisation policies of the late 1970s and the early 1980s in which coal, shipbuilding, heavy engineering, and other industries went into terminal decline. Tees Valley, in the North-East of England, for example lost most of its steel making facilities to China, and Middlesbrough, and on the 2019 English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (26 September 2019 MHCLG (2019) is not only ranked as the poorest and most deprived place in the country, it is also the most unsafe and insecure locality to reside in, according to a recent study on the impacts of the Brexit vote (Telford & Wistow, 2020, pp. 553–572).

Neo-classical liberal policies not only affected communities but also impacted regional economies, including the university sector. As some writers pointed to their anchor institutional role within regions (Goddard, 2009), as will be discussed in later chapters. Kagan and Diamond (2019) prefer the use of the term 'reflective' institution to describe a university, on the basis that anchor implies stability and resistance to change, whereas a more creative, reflective university suggests movement and transformation of local areas. We concur with this view, as we suggest throughout this book that in respect of an escalating vulnerability policy agenda, many universities have been both proactive and reactive in creatively responding to this 'wicked issue'.

Collini (2012) noted that Universities have evolved over time but are one of the most enduring institutions that afforded high levels of social trust, and recent debates have focused on what are the purposes or public good of universities. Neoliberalism which resulted in, massification, marketisation, rise in fees and student debt, plus the aggressive pursuit of internationalisation strategies, also threatened the ethical citizenry purpose of universities, with public good as central to higher education scholarship, emboldened in a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the national life (Boyer, 1996, p. 20). It brought threats to the kinds of communities and types of associations universities might care to engage with in pursuing this greater public good. Universities are not only a public good in themselves, but exist to ask what constitutes the public good or why we are seeing escalating levels of inequality and vulnerability (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Furthermore, West contends that universities can be a potential resource for rebuilding whole lives and communities, thereby concreting the significance of providing a very public good (West, 1996, p. 216). This book adds to understanding by introducing a growing evidence base on the ways in which universities develop support mechanisms to enable vulnerable individuals and groups to fulfil their potential.

A major theme of social scientific research over the recent past has been whether university expansion has reduced or reinforced educational, economic, and social inequalities or added significantly to the global knowledge economy. Moreover, the policies and practices of governments and the impacts of universities remain contested (David, 2011, pp. 147–163). Not only do universities play a role in ameliorating the consequences of inequality, but Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) offered a stark warning that failure to avoid high levels of inequality will result in the need for more

prisons, police, and a rise in mental illness, drug abuse and every other kind of social problem; in other words, escalating levels of vulnerability. Universities provide a space within which to re-affirm and reimagine the public realm and can be an agent for either reproducing or reinforcing social inequality, or an agent of social and civic transformation. There is a causal link between neo-liberal reforms, privatisation of public institutions, and deterioration of social well-being through gross inequalities (and therefore, a rise in vulnerable groups) (Nixon, 2011, p. 117).

During the 1990s in the UK, Mulgan and Landry (1995) signified a move from neo-liberalism and back to the Aristotelian idea that politics (and by implication, institutions like universities that make up the social and political system) should promote the good life, at a time when governments of all hues across the globe, and institutions such as OECD and WHO embraced the work of behavioural economists and psychologists who were influencing the development of metrics on happiness, satisfaction, and well-being (Evans, cited in Bache & Scott, 2018, pp. 25–48). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, and crucially following the 2008 global financial crisis, many prominent commentators, including the former Governor of the UK Bank of England, Mark Carney, have highlighted the crisis of capitalism and called for a re-assessment of the value system underpinning society and challenged long established conceptions of markets, arguing instead that they need to be analysed with regard to the social context within which they operate (Carney, 2021, p. 29). Advocating the need for a more caring capitalism that requires a stronger social infrastructure, wealth building, and social innovation across communities, he argued that COVID 19 had revealed deep strains and injustices, government and market failures and called for moral sentiments to advance the trinity of distributive justice, equality of opportunity, and fairness across generations (Carney, 2021, p. 258, 522). Adding force to this view, Edmans (2020, p. 309) highlighted the false dichotomy that businesses and other organisations should choose between shareholder value or social responsibility, instead of serving the interests of wider society, because in his view, business and society are intertwined and must integrate both economic and social purpose. Jordan (2021, p. 15) sees the COVID 19 pandemic as the ideal opportunity for governments across the globe to focus on citizen well-being and foster collectively agreed social (rather than market determined) values to enhance the lives of marginalised and excluded groups, such as those living in poverty, with disabilities, or ill health.