UK universities

The New Power University by Jonathan Grant – a call for transformation

Author examines how universities must adapt to blended and online learning but sidesteps the issue of finance

Jonathan Grant says universities have to adapt to a world with an ever greater need for the provision and recognition of affordable life-long learning taken in bite-sized chunks from different providers © Universal Images Group/Getty

Andrew Jack APRIL 4 2021

It began, literally, with the thesis of John Ralston Saul. When the Canadian philosopher realised the sources in his PhD on Algerian intelligence might be identifiable from the *roman-à-clef* he penned soon afterwards, he stole his doctorate from the library of King's College London.

When he returned the manuscript half a century later, he met and inspired Jonathan Grant, who had been recently appointed by the university, and whose own provocative and important new book *The New Power University* describes his mission.

Saul's *The Collapse of Globalism*, published in the build-up to Brexit, argued that the world was experiencing the latest in a cyclical series of "in-between times", when the existing system is being overturned and the value of knowledge, the role of the expert and the purpose of learning are called into question.

Just as the disruptions of digital access would have rendered Saul's self-censorship more difficult today, so Grant's own journey through academia would have been less likely in the past. He came from the different worlds of funding at Wellcome and independent research at Rand Europe; joined King's to lead a new Policy Institute focused on interdisciplinary research and impact more than publishing in obscure journals to win tenure; and helped shape its "Strategic Vision 2029".
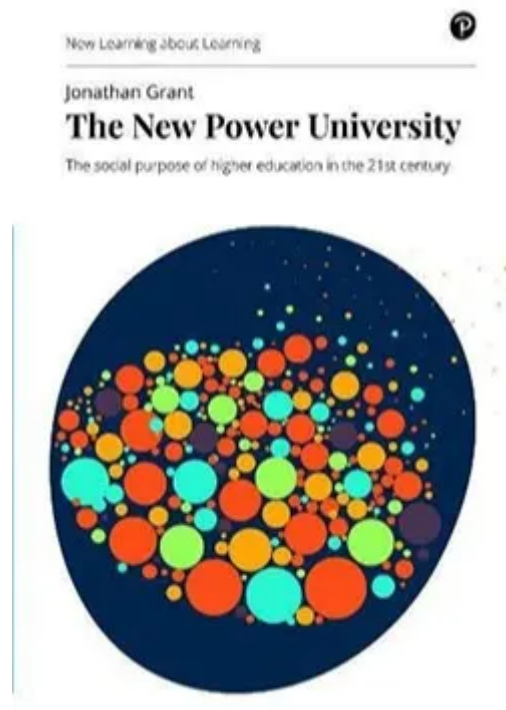
Grant is inspired by Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans' *New Power*, which describes a shift from formal, centralised, hierarchical, closed and managerial systems to ones that are participatory, transparent and governed by networks.

He describes the increasing culture of "marketisation", "managerialism" and job insecurity in universities, and the distorting role of global rankings, with reputation based on self-referential, insular yardsticks of research read only by other academics. In the process, he argues that higher education has lost touch with its wider social responsibilities.

He is critical of the structure of university research. He cites analysis showing that more than 85 per cent of the $120bn invested globally each year in biomedical health research is wasted, through insufficient focus on important questions as well as inappropriate, non-replicable or inaccessible outputs.

He also calls for a transformation in teaching, dismissing claims that Gen Z are "snowflakes" bent on undermining free expression. He says universities should embrace their social activism and respond to rising mental health concerns — which he attributes to a mixture of the accelerating influence of social media and the slowing transition to adulthood.

To survive, he argues that universities must shift towards blended and online learning in which students teach each other and lecturers become expert facilitators; overturn tenure; redirect research to the most pressing problems such as climate change; and develop deeper engagement and partnership with their communities to enhance social good.

They must also overhaul their role as gatekeepers of accreditation, adapting to a world with an ever greater need for the provision and recognition of affordable life-long learning taken in bite-sized chunks from different providers.

Covid-19 will only accelerate the pressures for disruption to the university model, and force higher education to adapt more rapidly

The most important limitations of Grant's book are those he himself concedes at the start, and yet which are closely intertwined and existential to the themes he addresses. First, his analysis is primarily based on the "anglosphere" universities of the UK, North America and Australia, which have much in common including a strong research reputation and the successful "export" of their model by attracting foreign students to their campuses.

Yet that requires comparison with other models, including the continental European state-funded university systems, which also generate important academic breakthroughs, charge lower fees and are more rooted in the local communities from which most of their student intakes are drawn.

Second, he sidesteps the issue of financing, pleading the complexities of comparing different jurisdictions and the need to focus on defining the purpose and values of universities before worrying about the funding models that will follow.

He is less strong in defining societal impact, identifying the best mix of priorities and how to achieve them. King's College has certainly demonstrated impressive social responsibility in empowering local communities, refugees and projects in lower-income countries, for instance.

But, like other prestigious universities, it has also invested heavily in a model of debt-funded physical campus expansion. It relies ever more on foreign students who provide a source of high tuition fees but are rarely selected in ways that improve social mobility in their own societies; and at the cost of a rising carbon footprint from their travel.

As Grant points out, Covid-19 will only accelerate the pressures for disruption to this model, and force higher education to adapt more rapidly. The cases and approaches he cites are certainly powerful examples to intensify that reflection.

The New Power University. The Social Purpose of Higher Education in the 21st century by Jonathan Grant, *Pearson Publishing, £21.99, 256 pages*