1

Taking stock

Global change and higher education

Over the last 50 or so years, higher education across the world has seen enormous changes, many of which have emerged in response to globalisation and neoliberalism. So many writers have explored the implications of these two phenomena for higher education that yet another explanation might seem superfluous. This book, however, is particularly concerned with teaching and learning in universities, so we will risk repeating what others have said in order to explore the implications of these forces on this area of academic endeavour.

In its most obvious form, globalisation is concerned with the economic changes that have resulted from the development of transportation and communication links thanks to advances in technology. As we will argue in this book, however, it also has social and cultural implications, as a particular set of ideas have come to dominate thinking and action around the world.

Economically, globalisation involves producing goods using networks stretching across national boundaries. Possibly even more important, given that this book is about higher education, is that globalisation is about using knowledge to ‘reinvent’ the goods that are produced as a result of the global economy. The mobile phone provides a simple example of the idea of ‘reinvention’. Many of us renew our handsets on a regular basis, possibly because of the contracts we take out with providers of cellular telecommunication or because we are enticed to buy new models. Typically, we ‘upgrade’ to a new handset even though our old devices may still be working perfectly well and serve our current needs adequately. The manufacturers of mobile phones, however, keep ‘reinventing’ their products so that updated models appear on a regular basis with ‘new features’.

These new models are usually designed (or reinvented if we continue to draw on this metaphor) in locations noted for their concentration of highly qualified engineers and other experts such as Silicon Valley, just outside San Francisco. Manufacturing these designs will involve sourcing the raw materials needed to make them from countries which often do not have the capacity to refine what is found abundantly within their borders. Titanium, for example, is found on South African beaches but is sent to places
such as Australia for processing. Once the raw materials have been processed into a usable form, they are then shipped to factories that turn them into components that will go into products manufactured in another factory possibly in another country altogether, such as China or Korea. The supply chains involved in the production of a mobile phone therefore stretch across the globe and need to be managed to ensure that what is needed for the next step in the process arrives ‘just in time’ for it to carry on without any hitches or delays. The choice of location for a particular stage of the process is often related to the cost of labour.

Actually, manufacturing a mobile phone is but part of the process involved in keeping this global chain moving. Demand for new versions of particular types of phone has to be created by marketers. Distributors then have to get the phones into shops or, increasingly, into a van that a courier will drive to deliver them to individual customers. Calculations have to be done in order to cost finished products in ways that will ensure the maximum profit for shareholders in the companies that make them and, of course, the markets on which shares are sold and bought also have to be managed. And, in the background, advances in technology keep the wheels rolling on the entire process.

All this requires a high level of skill on the part of those involved in the global economy. The so-called ‘Fordist’ models of mass production dominant in the last century required large numbers of workers who would do the same job on a factory assembly line for most of their lives. The demand, therefore, was for ‘low’ and not ‘high’ skills. In contrast, in the new global economy, ‘high skills’ are needed for all the processes of invention, sourcing and distribution, manufacturing, marketing and finance that drive it.

The demand for high skills has obvious implications for universities. Of all institutions offering education and training, universities, in principle at least, have the potential to
equip young people with the highest level of skills. As the global economy grew, therefore, universities came to be constructed as sites for this kind of training in spite of the fact that many institutions of higher education had little experience of offering anything other than study in the traditional academic disciplines and a few professional areas such as law, engineering or medicine.

The idea of an economy ‘fuelled by knowledge’ has captured the attention of governments around the world, with the result that they have promoted growth in their higher education systems in order to accommodate more and more of the young people they hope will become ‘knowledge workers’.

As young people flooded into universities in search of the qualifications that would equip them to work in the global economy, a number of things happened. The first was that student bodies grew in size. Suddenly a great many more universities were needed to accommodate the rapidly-increased student body.

As the student body ‘massified’ it became more ‘diversified’, as it came to comprise students from a wide array of social and cultural backgrounds rather than from the elite classes who had traditionally enjoyed almost exclusive access to higher forms of learning. This growth in numbers and the increased diversity brought with it attention to teaching and learning, the area of academic endeavour with which we are most concerned in this book.

The implications of the global economy were not restricted to a growth in student numbers and the diversification of the student body, however. Universities began to teach and research in new areas and different kinds of institution began to emerge. We may all be accustomed to the idea of the ‘polytechnic’ or ‘university of technology’ but, in the history of higher education, these are relatively new kinds of institution. Countries not only needed more universities to address the demand from prospective students and the goal of high skills for the globalised economy; they also needed different forms of universities to attend to all the different kinds of skills being identified.

Globalisation involves more than the economy as the increase in communication associated with it has also brought social and cultural change. Ideas and opinions flow across
the world in minutes thanks to social media. Concerns about conspicuous consumption are not new, with Veblen raising this issue as long ago as 1899, however, social media, a key mechanism of globalisation, means that opulent lifestyles are readily constructed on film and in other media such as the Instagram accounts of ‘influencers’. These lifestyles, and the ways of behaving and ideological valuing and thinking they embody, are adopted as ‘norms’ to which all are expected to aspire, even though the possibility of sharing in the riches they depict is relatively remote. The ease of communication associated with globalisation has spread not only ideas; it has also impacted on the use of English as the dominant language across the world.

For many young people, therefore, higher education is not only seen as a means to obtaining a well-paying job but also as a way of participating in the world depicted on computer and mobile phone screens. Historically, few young people followed a path leading to qualifications from universities as these were held to be the domain of the elite, and so most prepared for the world of work in other ways, such as apprenticeships and other forms of on-the-job training. In the globalised world, many of these opportunities have fallen away, with a degree or some other form of certification held up as the means through which to avoid low-paying, low-prestige jobs.

Globalisation is not the only force to have impacted on universities. The set of ideas collectively termed ‘neoliberalism’ has also affected them in profound ways. Neoliberalism entails a hegemony of market logic; that is the economisation of every aspect of our lives. The literature on neoliberalism typically focuses on free-market capitalism and, thus, the reduction of any form of control on economic activity conducted by individuals and companies. The deregulation of economic activity around most of the world has been accompanied by the privatisation of state entities, a phenomenon seen most clearly in post-Soviet Russia where so-called ‘oligarchs’ were alleged to have bought up oil companies and other entities previously owned by the state, often very cheaply (Hollingsworth & Lansey 2009). The laissez-faire approach to economic activity was accompanied by reductions in government spending, the thinking being that less ‘interference’ in the economy on the part of governments would result in the private sector taking over and providing services that had hitherto been state funded. Taxes on large industries and on wealthy individuals were reduced following arguments made by economists such as Milton Friedman (Friedman 1970) that this would allow for a ‘trickle-down’ effect which would lead to economic development that would eventually benefit all.

However, Madra and Adaman (2018) caution that neoliberalism needs to be understood from a much wider epistemic frame than simply a reduction in state power in favour of a free market. They argue that some governments, such as Erdoğan’s Turkey and Correa’s Ecuador, invoke entrepreneurial discourses and cost-benefit language in a manner which entirely exemplifies neoliberalism while at the same time deploying state power and non-market instruments (Madra & Adaman 2018). Neoliberalism can thus occur across varied political contexts and entails conceptualising human behaviour entirely as a form of cost-benefit analysis.

Neoliberalism, accompanied with other such ideas associated with globalisation, had an enormous impact on higher education, seen most visibly in the reduction of state
spending on the sector. The thinking here was that, if knowledge was a commodity that successful students acquired, they could effectively trade their certified skillset in the global economy by selling their labour as ‘knowledge workers’. Because individual students reap the economic benefits of such certification, they then should carry the costs of achieving it. Besides producing knowledge workers, the university was also seen, in this neoliberal thinking, to be in the business of selling their research in order to ‘reinvent’ existing goods. Because universities could then presumably sell such research-based products, they should fund their own development.

As state funding for higher education decreased, universities responded by raising the fees for tuition charged to students. At the same time as this happened, funding provided to students in many countries in the form of bursaries and scholarships was also reduced or, in some cases, fell aside altogether. This meant that all students, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, were increasingly required to pay for their education. As a qualification from an institution of higher education was considered by many to be key to getting a well-paid job, the cost of obtaining these credentials was generally accepted. For many (including, e.g. Mintz 2019), the formulation of education as credentials has resulted in the devaluing of education, as young people enter universities not because of any intrinsic interest in what is being studied but with the instrumental purpose of getting a qualification that will lead to a job and a ‘better’ life.

As student bodies have grown and diversified, huge changes have also occurred in the learning experiences offered to them. Most young people across the world now follow outcomes-based or competency-based curricula focusing on the ‘skills’ that are claimed will ready them for the workplace. At the same time, the idea that they can be moulded to develop the ‘attributes’ it is assumed they will need as graduates has gained prominence. Students follow modularised courses where modularisation has often been supported by claims about the greater efficiency and increased flexibility of short courses that can be combined in myriad ways into larger units of learning.

Academics have thus been pushed to redevelop curricula to meet the demands of outcomes- or competency-based approaches and modularisation. In some cases, curriculum development has been in areas where the academics themselves have never taught, a phenomenon fuelled by the desire of the institutions at which they work to branch out and offer qualifications responsive to the global job market and thus attractive to students.

It is not only in relation to teaching that academics have faced increased demands, however, since the insatiable desire for knowledge in the global economy has resulted in greater pressure than ever being placed on the need to produce research. At many universities, offices for ‘research development and innovation’ have now been established and the monitoring of production at an individual level is commonplace. At the same time as pressure on academics has increased, the idea that an academic career involved a tenured position in which an individual could rise through the ranks from lecturer to full professor has been eroded by an increase in the use of short-term contracts to regulate employment. In South Africa, 66% of academics are employed on a temporary basis (CHE 2020: 47). As academics have been called upon to do more, therefore, the benefits they could potentially enjoy have become less.
At the level of institutional leadership, vice-chancellors and principals have faced particular challenges. Not only do they need to consider how their university or college can best contribute to a globalised economy demanding students with the skills called for by employers; they need to do this in contexts of financial stringency and, thus, achieve ‘efficiencies’ never before imagined. These are often in the form of targets and norms set by the state. Calls to ‘widen participation’ so that students from a wide spectrum of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds can participate in higher learning have been made as a result of concerns for social justice and not just from a position related to the need for increased participation in the global economy.

University leaders thus face the difficult task of balancing efficiency (i.e. the need to contribute to the global economy) with equity (in the sense of providing higher education to a wider range of students). In the private institutions of higher education, which have proliferated in many countries since demand for qualifications has increased, the need to make educational decisions most often confronts the need to make profit.

The call for greater efficiency has also resulted in the outsourcing of services to private companies, many of which can offer, for example, cleaning or catering at prices more cost-effective than the same services run by universities themselves. University leaders therefore find themselves dealing with the contracts related to the provision of services and of endlessly negotiating for lower prices in tender processes. Such outsourcing increasingly includes activities once considered fundamental to the academic project, through ‘unbundling’, whereby partnerships with private corporations import learning materials, assessment processes, online learning management and more (McCowan 2017).

One more area in which neoliberalism has impacted on higher education has been on the proclaimed need for greater accountability and transparency. The thinking here is that, if funding is provided by the public either through their taxes or through payments for services or products, then bodies providing those services need to be accountable for the way the money is spent and the quality of what is provided. As a result, universities have seen the introduction of national quality assurance systems alongside increased reporting on the way they administer and spend any funding they receive. The funding itself is often dependent on an institution developing a ‘strategic plan’ with goals and targets. Achievement measured against these goals and targets is then monitored on a regular basis.

Developments such as these fall under the umbrella term ‘New Public Management’, an approach to making public service organisations more ‘business-like’. For universities, such developments have resulted in the introduction of a new level of management in the form of quality assurance offices, institutional planning divisions and so on. This has increased the number of administrative staff, a move often resented by academics who feel that staffing for teaching, research and community engagement is stretched to the limit (see, e.g. Edwards 2017).

In many respects, globalisation and neoliberalism have resulted in a model of ‘the university’ that is being followed across the world, regardless of the history of development of a particular country or the needs of its citizenry. This model of the ‘global university’ has been influential in other developments in recent years, including the protests that
emerged in 2015 and 2016 at institutions of higher education across the world in countries as diverse as South Africa, the United States, India and Kenya. Many of the protests focused on rising tuition fees and the inability of students from social groups other than the most affluent to pay them. However, it was not only funding that drove students to remonstrate since there were also objections to the very nature of the universities and, more specifically, to curricula which alienated students from their cultural and social roots. Objections to the forms universities had taken across the world and to the curricula that structured students’ learning experiences had their roots in decoloniality. These were underpinned by the argument that universities as they stood in many countries were ‘imports’ to foreign soil and that indigenous forms of education, historically practised in some of the most ancient institutions, had been marginalised and even eradicated (Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

**The challenge for the Global South**

What does all this mean for the complex reality of the Global South? Many countries in the South rely on the sale of commodities in the form of raw minerals and materials to drive their economies. The African continent, for example, has dominated the production of raw platinum, used extensively in electronics, for many years now. However, very little of the mineral refinement or component production happens on the continent. The ability to benefit more widely from the rich resources found on African soil is dependent on the knowledge and resources that can be used to add value, to refine, to use materials in manufacture and, then, to market and distribute finished products across the world.

In a report for the World Bank, Darvas et al. (2017: ix) have this to say on the subject in relation to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA):

> In 2016, economic growth in the [...] region reached the weakest pace in over two decades as a result of the low commodity prices that affect many economies in the region with strong reliance on mining and production of other raw materials. Against the backdrop of slow growth, it is even more important for SSA countries to diversify their economies, improve productivity, build value chains for agriculture, and improve both domestic and export markets. Because knowledge is the driver of productivity and economic growth, these goals require building human capital through more accessible, equitable, and better-quality education and training systems.

If we follow the argument made above, what is needed is enhanced capacity to engage with the globalised, knowledge-based economy as a result of the production of more graduates who can contribute to processes of adding value to the natural resources on which the continent can draw.

This is an economic argument. However, what is even more needed are graduates who are socially, politically, and not only economically, aware and who can contribute to the development of societies where the vast majority live in unfavourable living conditions.
For many, including Wheelahan (2010), access to the kind of theorised, structured knowledge that has historically dominated university teaching is about gaining access to ‘society’s conversation’. Access to certain kinds of knowledge is but one more way of seeing how the ‘equity versus efficiency’ tension plays out.

Unesco (2020) data for the entire African continent shows the current enrolment in higher education standing at just over 12% of the 18- to 24-year-old cohort. This is in comparison to the global average of 32%. Within these figures, enormous disparities exist. In Egypt, the figure stands at 33%, in Tanzania 4% and in Niger only 2%. With such small numbers of students entering higher education in many countries, there is clearly a need to ensure that the experiences offered to them are as good as they can possibly be and that the graduates who result can serve the needs of their countries and the societies in which they live in ways which are informed by broad economic, social and political debates.

Enrolments in higher education have grown on the continent with, for example, Darvas et al. (2017) noting that, in sub-Saharan Africa, enrolments counted fewer than 400 000 across the region in 1970, a number which had increased to approximately 7.2 million by 2013. Notably, this growth has taken place in a context of financial stringency. The ‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’ enacted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund placed a number of conditions on receiving funding, many of which can be seen to have restrained the freedom of the university sector in the Global South to determine its own structure and purpose. Funding was particularly problematic when the decision was taken to withdraw funding for higher education in favour of the development of the schooling sector. This Global North policy can be seen to have had a number of deleterious effects on higher education in the South (Amutabi 2002; Atteh 1996; Nkinyangi 1991). According to researchers such as Amutabi (2002), this resulted in overcrowding in teaching venues and halls of residence and the lack of facilities as basic as seats in lecture rooms, as well as a generalised lack of academic resources including staff members.

In this context, there is a critical need for universities to consider what a growth in student numbers may mean for them. As long ago as 1973, Trow identified the achievement of a 15% participation rate in higher education as the point at which a system ‘massifies’. Trow’s focus in writing about ‘massification’, in what is now a classic piece on higher education, is not numbers. Rather, his purpose was to point out most forcefully that the challenge in a ‘massified’ system goes beyond accommodating large classes and managing large universities to include dealing with the diversity that numbers bring.

As we have already noted, universities have historically catered for a small elite; an elite who have been groomed for tertiary study thanks to all the experiences afforded to them before enrolment. These experiences are not limited to schooling but also encompass those afforded by the home of origin. As numerous ethnographic studies have shown (including, for example, Heath’s seminal Ways with Words, 1983), the children of middle-class, educated parents are groomed for schooling literally from the day of their birth through talk and activities in their homes. These children enter school with an advantage which is then reinforced by their caregivers at home. Talk and activities in the homes of these children not only support learning in school but also challenge and extend it in ways
that better prepare them for higher education. Local studies (see, e.g. Armstrong 2019) show how children from marginalised communities enter schooling without any of the privileged connections their classmates might enjoy.

While many countries are a long way from achieving a ‘massified’ higher education system, they still need to confront issues related to diversity as their higher education systems grow. A child born into a family in rural South Africa, for example, is unlikely to benefit from the advice and support of family members who have already attended higher education. The location of the family home itself and the poverty associated with it will impact on a young person’s ‘connectedness’ to the wider world. In addition, the knowledge and practices this child would have accrued in her home of origin are then less likely to be acknowledged in higher education.

If we believe that higher education has the potential to contribute to the well-being of societies through the production of research and of graduates who can contribute to critical discourse and, thus, to democracy itself, the idea of widening participation is crucial. Even more significantly, this needs to be done in universities where reduced funding has led to poor-quality infrastructure and a scarcity of resources and where, we argue, dominant ideas about teaching and learning normalise a particular way of being and silence others by failing to take into account the diversity of students’ socio-cultural and economic contexts.

Why look at South Africa?

This book looks at teaching and learning in higher education through a particular focus on South Africa. One could argue that South Africa is a special case given its iniquitous history of apartheid. It is indeed true that South Africa faced extraordinary challenges as it shifted to democracy but the argument made above, that the Global South as a whole faces issues of efficiency (i.e. the economic imperative) at the same time as engaging with those related to equity (the social imperative), was also true of South Africa. It was never a case of ‘either/or’. Rather, policymakers had to attempt a complex balancing act as soon as it became clear that the end of apartheid was imminent following the release of Nelson Mandela, the country’s first democratically elected president, from jail in 1990.

Apartheid resulted in the imposition of economic sanctions and the isolation associated with these. In 1990, South Africa faced an urgent need to join the global economy from which it had been excluded. The social imperative related to the exclusion of the majority of the population from decision-making, and to the processes, such as higher education, that allow extensive participation in the development of policy and social structures. The way in which this nation at the southernmost tip of the continent confronted this challenge is thus of relevance to those working in higher education systems elsewhere, especially, as we will argue, through a reflection on the many things that did not work out in the way they were intended by policymakers and institutional leaders.

In many respects, this book is an attempt to answer questions about what went wrong in South African higher education. The book draws on multiple research projects we have undertaken over the past two decades but in particular on a piece of research we did for
the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the body established to advise the minister on higher education. The White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education 1997, Section 2.69), intended to guide the transformation of the higher education system, notes that, although the primary responsibility for quality assurance must lie with institutions, a role existed for an umbrella body that would promote and coordinate efforts throughout the system. This role was assigned to the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a standing committee of the CHE. More specifically, the White Paper established the functions of the HEQC as including programme accreditation, institutional auditing and quality promotion.

In 2005, the HEQC embarked on the first cycle of institutional audits, producing a wealth of data related to public universities. As the audits came to a close, we were commissioned to produce a meta-analysis of teaching and learning which attempted to evaluate the impact of the audits on this core area of academic activity. In order to complete the research, we were provided with all the data produced as a result of audit processes: the reports in which each institution being audited had evaluated itself against audit criteria, the institutional profiles, or analyses of institutional data produced by the CHE, and the reports written by the panels appointed to audit each university.

Arguably, this work is the only piece produced to date on teaching and learning in the South African system that is based on such comprehensive data; data that not only included analyses of student performance and staff demographics, but also in-depth accounts on the part of institutions regarding the way they believed they had met the set of criteria developed for teaching and learning as part of the audit cycle.

In order to conduct the research, we needed to develop a framework to analyse the data we had been given. The framework we developed, based on Roy Bhaskar’s (1979) critical realism and Margaret Archer’s (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000) Social Realism allowed us to see that, although the higher education system had changed significantly in relation to teaching and learning in some respects, in others it had not (Boughey & McKenna 2016). Even more significantly, the use of the framework allowed us to see how the lack of change in some areas led to the failure to achieve equity or efficiency in the system. At the time we undertook the research, other studies analysing the performance of cohorts of students passing through the system (see, e.g. Scott et al. 2007; Lesteka & Maile 2008) had already identified the inefficiency of the system in terms of high non-completion and slow throughput rates. Those same studies had also shown that it was black South African students, who had finally been able to access the system in large numbers following the first democratic election, who bore the brunt of poor performance figures and, thus, that the goal of equity was not being achieved.

In many respects, therefore, the focus on South Africa in this book is relevant for all countries struggling with issues related to equity and efficiency. This is especially the case since South Africa has engaged with many reforms that other nations may now be considering. The development of national qualifications frameworks, for example, is being considered by many countries across the continent as we write, yet the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa has prompted curriculum
reform in universities that has not always been as positive as anticipated (see, e.g. Allais 2014), an observation we discuss in more detail in Chapter Five. In a similar vein, South African experiences of modularisation, or the breaking up of learning into small, itemised pieces which are accorded credits, or of the advocacy for ‘Mode 2 knowledge’ (critiqued by the likes of Muller 2001a; Kraak 2000), might inform similar initiatives elsewhere on the continent.

We also believe that our work on student learning in countries seeking to admit larger numbers of ‘first generation’ students, that is, students from families who have previously not been able to access higher education, has important implications for anyone concerned with making higher education more equitable through the enhancement of teaching and curriculum design. This work is informed by all the research we have conducted over the last 20 years or more on student learning from what we term a ‘social perspective’ that resonates with ideas of ‘humanising pedagogy’ (see, e.g. Bartolomé 1994; Salazar 2013). We believe this has the potential to provide insights into teaching and learning regardless of where it takes place, but especially in contexts where universities have long thought about teaching and learning as neutral and fair when, in fact, they have demanded ways of being and knowing that have privileged some over others.

The framework drawn from the work of Bhaskar (1979) and Archer (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000) allowed us to see what had changed, and what had not changed, in teaching and learning as a result of the first cycle of quality assurance work in South Africa (Boughey & McKenna 2017). In addition to this, the framework also allowed us to see how the reshaping of the South African system, like other higher education systems elsewhere, had been influenced by ideas from the Global North, and how institutions had responded to these ideas in ways which often worked against the intentions of policymakers.

As two academics working in a centre for teaching and learning in a South African university, we were also aware as we wrote of our own day-to-day work focusing on the development of staff in their capacity as academic teachers. We also draw on our work as reviewers for journals, where we note the increase in research on teaching and learning, particularly by academics with backgrounds in disciplines other than education or the other social sciences. These experiences have allowed us to note that a great deal of work in teaching and learning in higher education draws on relativist understandings of knowledge and knowing, as we will discuss in Chapter Two, whereby all knowledge about teaching and learning is seen to be fluid and dependent on individual interpretation. In contrast to such relativist approaches, the framework on which our research drew is realist in the sense that it assumes that there is a reality that exists independently of human action and thought. The philosophy underpinning the framework, Critical Realism, is enjoying increased interest in the world of educational research and we were drawn to the idea of demonstrating the way it could be used in relation to understanding the problems we had identified.

We have therefore described the framework in some detail, in Chapter Two of this book, to explain how it can be used in educational research. This is because we were drawn to the idea that demonstrating the framework in action as we analysed developments in
South African higher education from the early 1990s onwards might be of assistance to others working in the field. The remaining chapters in the book then aim to make the use of the framework overt as we work with our analysis.

**What does this book aim to do?**

Our book then, aims to do a number of things. First, it represents the attempts of two academics who have been involved in many of the national initiatives intended to transform higher education over the past 20 or more years in one country to answer the questions ‘What worked?’ and ‘What didn’t work?’ in order to raise questions about the South African context in ways that might be of use to those working here and in other countries, particularly countries in the Global South facing similar rapid increases in student numbers and sector-wide reforms.

The second thing we aim to do is to demonstrate that we have used a theoretical framework to analyse a higher education system. As experienced supervisors of postgraduate students, we are particularly aware of how difficult it is to understand how theory can be used, literally, to ‘see the world differently’. An analogy we often use in our own teaching is that theory is like a pair of spectacles. Without spectacles, you see the world in one way. Once you put on a pair of spectacles, and depending on which spectacles you choose, you will see the world differently. Some spectacles, for example, will allow you to see things in fine detail ‘close up’. Others, for example those with tinted lenses, provide us with a particular view of things. We can wear many different kinds of spectacles but need to choose which we wear depending on what we want to see.

In this book we have chosen to wear spectacles with Social and Critical Realist lenses. We put on our spectacles and justify their choice in Chapter Two. We then look through our spectacles to present our analysis of the system. This is exactly what postgraduate students do when they embark on a piece of research and, in the book, we aim to show what this involves.

Finally, and this is probably the most important aim of the book, we want to argue for a different way of understanding students, of understanding the curriculum and of understanding the universities themselves. In order to do this, we have to cast aside our common-sense assumptions (something our theoretical spectacles allow us to do) and, literally, question much of what we have been led to believe. We have had to critically interrogate the way dominant ideas have shaped our thinking. This is our most important aim, as we believe that it is only by questioning common-sense assumptions and dominant ways of thinking that we will begin to understand what we can begin to do to make things better.

The book has required us to take a long hard look at much of what we have been implicated in for so many years. If it can persuade others to do the same, our hope is that our universities might begin to move towards offering students the kinds of learning experiences we believe they so richly deserve.