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Letter from the editors

Welcome to this Special Issue on 'International learning communities in uncertain times', edited (as seems only fitting for such a topic) by international guest editors. In this case your guest editors are Dennis Murray, Senior Honorary Fellow at the LH Martin Institute in the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Matthew Andrews, Secretary and Registrar at the University of Gloucestershire in the UK.

It has been our pleasure to bring this issue of the journal into being on a topic that is relevant and pressing to colleagues working in higher education across the globe. Populist nationalism, on the rise in many countries, could be argued to be the natural opposite of higher education. Perhaps the most ancient institute of higher learning we know of, at Taxila in modern-day Pakistan, attracted students from many different countries. Within the medieval origins of western universities, there was an international ideal too, with students travelling from across Europe to learn from the most renowned scholars of their day. This sense of a border-less educational space has never left higher education and pervades even the most provincial of universities today. There can be few universities that do not place great value in their international perspectives, crafting global citizens out of their students.

At one point in the ascendant, the notion of a liberal international consensus is seemingly now threatened – or at least severely shaken. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama typifies the former sense of confidence (perhaps even triumphalism). In the 1990s, Fukuyama pronounced The End of History. His argument was not that the 'occurrence of events' had ended but that history as a 'single, coherent, evolutionary process' had reached its conclusion in liberal democracy. Liberal democracy, and with it the free market, he asserted had become 'the only coherent political aspiration'.[1] Whether we believe this to be true or not, education, and especially higher education, was said by Fukuyama to be at the root of what created the conditions for liberal democracy to flourish.[2]

Perhaps because universities are seen as creating the conditions for liberal democracy, political opposition has grown. In Hungary, the right-wing government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has clamped down on universities while accusations of an academic purge led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have caused international concern.

In the USA and UK, the rise of populist nationalism is exemplified by the election of Donald Trump and the vote to leave the EU. More than finding themselves on the wrong side of current political trends, universities in the UK were even approached by a Brexit-supporting Member of Parliament and asked to provide the names of any professors involved in teaching European affairs with reference to Brexit. Many suspected a McCarthyite purge.

What are universities to do? Throwing out accusations against political leaders who seek a withdrawal from open global engagement is one possibility, but higher education is about more than engaging in simple political combat. Higher education is about understanding how and why things are the way they are, and so engaging with the causes of the current malaise to find a cure, rather than addressing the symptoms alone, is surely the way forward.

It is that attempt to understand the climate of global politics and find a way forward that inspired this Special Issue. We have not, however, found the solution – and were never expecting to. But we hope to have started to define more precisely the questions we need to be asking.

Jon McNaughtan and colleagues examine how university presidents in the USA used campus-wide communications to react to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This important investigation touches on multiple hot topics in contemporary higher education: not just how university leaders are responding to political events but how the use of social media is creating a connected environment that encourages and perhaps even requires a visible response.

Postcolonial Papua New Guinea is the context for the investigation of internationalisation and indigenisation conducted by Jeanette Baird and Maretta Alup Kula-Semos. Their conclusion is that stasis,

rather than synthesis, is the outcome of a clash between forces tending towards either indigenisation or internalisation and that a hybrid model is necessary to secure the relevance of universities.

Soheyda Gokturk, Ozlem Sismanoglu Kaymaz and Oguzhan Bozoglu consider how universities in Turkey have approached internationalisation in the political environment following the attempted coup in 2016. The political crisis that followed led to arrests, dismissals and limitations on academic freedom. Under such intense pressures, the authors have identified a trend for some Turkish institutions to satisfy revenue expectations by reaching out to countries such as Malaysia, China, Pakistan, and Iraq rather than the democratic west where relationships are strained or complex.

Ka Ho Mok examines the active promotion of national identity by China in the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau. Mok suggests the success of these policies were limited due to a failure in policy coordination, making it difficult for students from the SARs to stay in mainland China. This paper is a useful reminder that universities are seen as a means of spreading cultural relevance outside of the western context.

The purposes of higher education form part of the focus of Christopher Hill and William Lawton as they explore the digital divide and global inequality from a university perspective. The authors argue that 'universities are rethinking their roles in the face of such misalignment with political leaderships and citizenries' and their inherent internationalism. Yet they conclude that without substantial changes universities add to global inequality by bolstering economic nationalism.

Svetlana Shenderova tackles life after the Russian annexation of Crimea and explores the continuation of international partnerships despite such tensions. Her case study explores double degrees from inside Finnish and Russian universities and how they have fared in the midst of increasing tension between the EU and Russia.

The context for the delivery of international policies in the UK is surveyed by Steve Woodfield, who identifies an 'ongoing tension between investing in international education for long-term wider benefits and sustaining or maintaining the income stream from student recruitment'.

Lisa Unangst brings our international investigations back to the American setting. She portrays international alumni affairs as a 'bright spot' in an otherwise worrying global context. As editors, we hope that positive conclusion provides not only optimism for the future but an incentive for further work to consider how universities may play a positive role building bridges rather than walls in an increasingly fractious global context.

All of these papers taken together provide a fascinating insight into the role and status of internationalisation in global higher education from the perspective of different countries experiencing the current crisis in what had hitherto seemed to be a secure international political settlement. We are clear, however, that we have only scratched the surface. The research questions are new and different, and the territory is largely uncharted. The paper which opens this Special Issue, produced by one of your guest editors, therefore makes an attempt set the scene both for the topic in general and these papers in particular.

Notes

1. Fukuyama, F. (1992). The End of History and the Last Man. London: Penguin. pp. xii-xiii.
2. Ibid. pp. 116–7.

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