



EDITED BY NICHOLAS BARR

Shaping higher education

50 years after Robbins

LSE

THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

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education***

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The Robbins Report on higher education, published in October 1963, underpinned many of the changes in British higher education since then, notably the great expansion of the system. This book comprises edited transcripts of the opening session of a conference at the London School of Economics and Political Science to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Report, together with some surrounding material. An electronic version of the book is available at lse.ac.uk/50YearsAfterRobbins, together with a link to a podcast of the entire conference.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) hosted a conference on 22 October 2013 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Robbins Report on higher education. This book is a collection of edited transcripts from the first session of the conference together with some surrounding material.

The origin of the conference was a letter of 25 January 2012 from David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, to the Director of LSE.

“The 50th anniversary of the Robbins Report ... takes place in just over 18 months’ time – on 23 October 2013. I am writing to see whether the London School of Economics might consider hosting a conference to mark the anniversary. ...

“The Robbins Report was one of the most thorough of all post-war social policy reviews and its recommendations continue to shape the sector. It would clearly be fitting to mark the anniversary next year with a conference on the history and contemporary influence of Lionel Robbins. ...

“Lord Robbins was deeply associated with LSE for around half a century but that is not the only reason why LSE would be the perfect host for any event. The Robbins Report’s influence also rests on the underlying research – for example on the future demand for higher education – that was conducted so skilfully by Claus Moser and Richard Layard, both of whom were at LSE at the time. ...”

The conference was designed by a committee comprising Nicholas Barr, Sue Donnelly (British Library of Political and Economic Science), Howard Glennerster, Tony Travers, Simeon Underwood and Anne West, advised and supported by the Director’s Office and Press Office. Craig Calhoun was actively engaged in the intellectual shape of the conference from an early stage, pre-dating the time he formally took up his appointment as Director of the School.

The organising committee is grateful to the LSE Annual Fund for financial support both for the conference and this book.

The event was organised by the LSE Conference and Events Office led by Alan Revel. Particular thanks are due to Sooraya Mohabeer whose skills and effort were fundamental to the success of the conference. Fiona Whiteman’s customary calm efficiency and eye for detail made the production of this book wonderfully easy.

We are grateful to the Social Market Foundation for permission to reproduce the Introduction by David Willetts, which is extracted from one of their publications.

The pictures in this volume draw on a larger exhibition curated by Kathryn Hannan – see <http://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/lionelrobbins>. Particular thanks are due to Sue Donnelly and the Library staff. Thanks are due also to the Robbins family for permission to reproduce pictures from their family collection.

Nicholas Barr on behalf of the organising committee.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Nicholas Barr is Professor of Public Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the author of numerous books and articles including *The Economics of the Welfare State* (OUP, 5th edn, 2012), *Financing Higher Education: answers from the UK* (with Iain Crawford) (Routledge 2005), and *Reforming Pensions: principles and policy choices* (with Peter Diamond) (OUP, 2008). Alongside his academic career is wide-ranging involvement in policy. He had two spells at the World Bank – from 1990-92 working on the design of income transfers and health finance in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia, and in 1995-96 as an author of the *World Bank's World Development Report 1996: from plan to market*. He has been a visiting scholar at the Fiscal Affairs Department at the International Monetary Fund and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Councils on Demographic Shifts and on Ageing Society.

Craig Calhoun is Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a School Professor of Social Science. Previously he was president of the Social Science Research Council and variously a professor, institute director and dean at North Carolina, Columbia and New York universities. Calhoun's research and writing have ranged

across the social sciences, history, and philosophy. His book, *The Roots of Radicalism: tradition, the public sphere, and early 19th century social movements*, was published by Chicago in 2012 and *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* (a collective project with Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Michael Mann, and Georgi Derluguian) by Oxford in 2013. Among Calhoun's best known earlier books are *Nations Matter: culture, history, and the cosmopolitan dream* (Routledge 2007), and *Neither Gods Nor Emperors: students and the struggle for democracy in China* (California 1994). Calhoun has also edited several well-known collections including *Knowledge Matters: the public mission of the research university* (Columbia 2011).

Howard Glennerster is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy and an Associate of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Failing the 11-plus he attended a secondary modern school, transferring only later to Letchworth Grammar School. After graduating from Oxford with a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, he worked for the Labour Party Research Department in the period leading up to Harold Wilson's victory in 1964 including proposals to create what became the Open University. He joined LSE in 1964 as a research officer in the Higher Education Research Unit under Claus Moser. Here he developed ideas for a "Graduate Tax" and broader work on the finance and economics of education. He began teaching in the Department of Social Administration in 1968 where he remained until he retired (in name only) in 2001. He was chairman of STICERD (The Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines) for seven years before that. His wide-ranging writing includes some of the earliest UK articles on income-contingent loans.

Richard Layard is Emeritus Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, where he was until 2003 the founder-director of the Centre for Economic Performance. He first came to LSE after being senior research officer for the Robbins Committee and helped Claus Moser set up the Higher Education Research Unit. He is a labour economist who has made major contributions on unemployment, inflation, inequality and post-Communist reform. He was an early advocate of the welfare-to-work approach to European unemployment. In 2008, he was awarded the IZA Prize in Labour Economics. He now heads the Programme on Wellbeing at LSE. Since 2000 he has been a member of the House of Lords and is a keen advocate of making subjective wellbeing of the people the central objective of governments.

Claus Moser is a social statistician, former Head of Government Statistics, former warden of Wadham College, Oxford, former chairman of the Royal Opera House, vice chairman of N M Rothschild, the Merchant Bank, president of the Royal Statistical Society, and since 2001 in the House of Lords as a cross-bencher. Much of his life he has spent at LSE, first as a statistics student, and after the war on the academic staff, for many years as Professor of Social Statistics. After that he served on various LSE Committees, including the governing body. He has also been involved with various other universities including serving as chancellor for Keele University and the Open University in Israel. As he looks back on a long life of 90 years, he is particularly proud of his work on the Robbins Committee, his years at LSE and Wadham College and of course, all the time he has spent in music, not least at the Royal Opera House and playing the piano.

Simeon Underwood has worked as an administrator and manager in the higher education sector since 1977, at Leeds, York and Lancaster universities and at LSE since 2000. As Academic Registrar and Director of Academic Services he heads a range of student-facing services from recruitment to examinations. In the 1990s he also acted as consultant and adviser to a large number of universities across the sector on QAA Subject Review and the wider quality assurance movement. Between 2008 and 2010 he was chair of the national Academic Registrars Council; in this role he was centrally involved in negotiations with the UK Border Agency over the new student visa regime. Currently he is an occasional contributor to the *Times Higher Education*, mainly on topics around the theme of deregulation.

David Watson has been principal of Green Templeton College and Professor of Higher Education at the University of Oxford since October 2010. He was Professor of Higher Education Management at the Institute of Education, University of London, from 2005-2010, and vice-chancellor of the University of Brighton between 1990 and 2005. His most recent books are *Managing Civic and Community Engagement* (Open University Press 2007), *The Question of Morale: managing happiness and unhappiness in university life* (McGraw Hill 2009), and *The Question of Conscience: higher education and personal responsibility* (Institute of Education Press 2014), as well as three co-edited publications, *The Dearing Report: ten years on* (Institute of Education 2007), *The Engaged University* (Routledge 2011) and *Learning Transitions in Higher Education* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

David Willetts is the Minister for Universities and Science. He has been MP for Havant since 1992 and previously worked at HM Treasury and the Number 10 Policy Unit. He served as Paymaster General in the last Conservative government. He has written widely on economic and social policy, and is a council member of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. His book *The Pinch: how the baby boomers took their children's future – and why they should give it back* was published in 2010.

Graeme Wise is Assistant Director (Policy) at the National Union of Students, where he works mainly on policy relating to structure, markets, funding and participation in higher education. He was the principal staff member at NUS dealing with the Browne Review and subsequent policy developments, and is currently fulfilling the same role in relation to broader matters of higher education reform such as the future of regulation and data capability in the sector. He has also recently led a major programme of research and policy development at NUS on the issue of student financial support for living costs. He has previously worked in a wide range of areas including development in student representation, charity law reform, co-operative models in education and student services, Scottish public and educational affairs, as well as more conceptual work on the curriculum and the question of “students as consumers”. He has degrees from Canterbury Christ Church University and Goldsmiths College, University of London, and is currently undertaking a doctorate in policy studies at the University of Bristol. He lives in Deptford, London.



Lionel Robbins, Sir Huw Wheldon and Professor Ralf Dahrendorf at the naming of the Lionel Robbins Building, 27 July 1978

PREFACE

Nicholas Barr and Howard Glennerster

It must be difficult for the current generation to conceive of the higher education world of 1963 and what views about its future were then current.

Only about four in every 100 young people entered full-time courses at university.¹ Only 1 per cent of working-class girls and 3 per cent of working-class boys went on to full-time degree level courses.² Another 4.5 per cent of young people went on to teacher training and other full-time courses in further education. Just over 5 per cent more were in part-time further education. For many this was an acceptable, indeed inevitable, state of affairs. Many in universities were convinced that they were already scraping the bottom of the barrel – “more means worse”, to quote a notion popular at the time – and that any further expansion would spell disaster.

Lord Robbins, who had taught at LSE since the 1920s and had had many public roles, was asked to chair a Committee

1 Lionel Robbins (1963) *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*. Cmnd 2154, table 5. London: HMSO.

2 L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, table 21.

of Enquiry into the Future of Higher Education. True to his background he insisted that its conclusions had to be based on the best available evidence. He appointed the School's Professor of Social Statistics, Claus Moser, to head the research team, and the report was supported by five volumes of statistical evidence.

What the research did – notably in the devastating Appendix One – was to explode the notion that only a tiny minority were capable of benefiting from higher education. A steadily rising percentage of young people were obtaining the necessary entrance qualifications and many others had the ability but were leaving school at 16 or even earlier. Four out of five young people failed the 11-plus exam and went on to schools that offered no or few qualifications; yet their capacities, revealed in numerous surveys, suggested that many were capable of getting higher qualifications. There was a large pool of untapped talent. Restricted entry to higher education was a major barrier to the British economy. In France and Sweden the comparable numbers were twice as great and in the USA nearly six times so.³

The evidence argued strongly for an expansion of higher education. The Report, however, went further. It did not simply recommend current expansion (ie a greater supply of university places) but that in the long run the number of places in higher education should be expanded to ensure that all who were qualified and wished to enter should be able do so (ie that the supply of places should expand to meet qualified demand). This recommendation provoked furious letters to *The Times* lambasting the Report's utopianism. But the dam had been broken. New universities began to be built.

³ L Robbins (1963), op cit, table 19.

Where had the ideas and the evidence come from? To a large extent they had been nurtured at LSE. In the 1950s the modern sociology of education began there with the work of Chelly Halsey and Jean Floud. Their research showed that intellectually capable children from working-class homes often did badly at the 11-plus (the closest example being one of the authors of this Preface); and if they did pass, tended to leave school early. The research by Halsey and Floud was powerfully reinforced by the work of J W B Douglas, who had founded the first longitudinal study of a sample of children born in one week in March 1946. The work came within the responsibility of the School's Population Investigation Unit, one of the major demographic powerhouses of the time. These children had been followed through their infant years and on through school; their health, family background and intellectual capacities had been measured and recorded. As Claus Moser put it at the time, this was the "methodological equivalent of the eighth wonder of the world". The pool of talent revealed was incontrovertible.

Then there was the influence of the very new human-capital school of economics. Investment in higher education paid off both privately and publicly.

So a very LSE climate of ideas and research helped to shape the Report.

In retrospect the Report was not right about everything. A major area where it lacked courage (or perhaps was politically astute) was in its plans to finance expansion. Initially, the additional numbers were relatively small. It seemed possible to continue the funding regime as before. The Exchequer would finance

universities, there would be no tuition fees, and the state would finance, quite generously, the living expenses of students. The optimism of the 1960s made this look possible. But before long the Treasury began to have doubts, and sought ways to save money. Student maintenance grants, to cover living costs, became less generous and expansion slowed down, and then stagnated during the 1980s. Robbins had transformed the notion of restricted access, but the Report had not transformed the finance of higher education to pay for the expansion.

LIONEL ROBBINS

Lionel Robbins (1898-1984), though eminent as an economist, was much more. He saw active service on the Western Front in 1917-18. He made major contributions to economics as a teacher and writer. *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, published in 1932 and perhaps his most famous book, is a methodological classic which is still regularly cited.

He was also deeply involved in policy. Moving in circles at the centre of economic policy, he advocated open, informed and intelligent discussion. Though an advocate of free trade he was never a free market purist, believing that such a system had grave deficiencies. During the second world war he served as Director of the Economic Section advising government on how to run the economy in wartime. He also worked

closely alongside J M Keynes in the post-war negotiations for US loans.

Later he chaired the Committee on Higher Education whose report (the Robbins Report, 1963) advocated what at the time was the revolutionary idea that anyone with the aptitude and desire to go to university should be able to do so, and thus underpinned the major expansion of British higher education.

He served as chairman of the *Financial Times* from 1961-70 and was a government-appointed non executive board member of BP. Robbins was passionate about the visual and performing arts – supporting both through his involvement in their administration, for example at the National Gallery and the Royal Opera House. He also advocated large-scale government support for the arts.

Alongside these diverse public roles was a lifetime devotion to the London School of Economics, where he studied as an undergraduate and spent the major part of his career as Professor of Economics, and where the development of the Department of Economics is one of his major legacies. He later served as chairman of LSE's Court of Governors during a particularly turbulent time in the late 1960s.

For a magisterial biography of Lionel Robbins, see *Lionel Robbins* by Susan Howson (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Not all the proposals from LSE's thinkers had been accepted. In evidence to the Committee, Alan Peacock and Jack Wiseman of the Economics Department argued that the growing cost of expansion should be met in a different way. Students should pay for their higher education at least in part through loans which they would obtain from the state and repay through the tax system. For the Committee that was a bridge too far.

Yet many years later it was a bridge that had to be crossed. By the late 1980s, 25 years after the Report, the participation rate in higher education was around 14 per cent, still low by international standards, in part because places were largely publicly financed. A small student loan was introduced in 1990 partly replacing the maintenance grant. The reform provoked two separate controversies: whether the loans were well designed; and whether the principle was right.

Many at LSE, including Peacock and Wiseman, Mark Blaug and Howard Glennerster in the 1960s, and Nicholas Barr since the 1980s, have argued that loan repayments should be collected as an income-related payroll deduction alongside income tax (in the jargon, loans should have income-contingent repayments). From 1998, loans in the UK have been of this sort, an aspect which is no longer controversial.

The controversy about the principle remains. What are the arguments for financing higher education in part through student loans?

The first argument concerns fairness. "Free" is just another word for "someone else pays". Despite some reduction in the socio-economic gradient in participation, those who go

to university continue to be disproportionately from better-off backgrounds. Thus undue reliance on taxpayers redistributes from people who are less well off to people from better-off backgrounds whose degrees will help them to remain among the better off. Separately, the evidence is powerful, that it is not student loans which primarily deter access for people from poor backgrounds, but lack of attainment in school. Thus the most powerful levers to widen participation should be added emphasis on early child development, approaches that support pupils who are struggling, and policies to encourage young people to stay on in school.

The second argument is that what economists call “skill-biased technological change” is increasing the demand for skills. To remain competitive, countries need large, high-quality systems of higher education. Recently, the LSE Growth Commission has argued that one of the UK’s great strengths has been its system of higher education, an outcome largely based on the Robbins expansion.

However, policy faces a potential train crash. On the one hand there are pressures for the expansion of higher education. But those demands face longer-term pressures on public finances, notably the striking rise in the number of old and very old over the next 30 years. This goes along with the impact of an increasingly competitive global economy which limits a country’s capacity to increase taxes, or at least is thought to do so. England, at least, has developed an answer to that dilemma, even if it could be improved upon. And it is one of which, we suspect, Robbins would have approved.

Above all the central Robbins vision – high-quality higher education open to all who have the ability and aptitude to benefit – is both alive and more relevant than ever.

FURTHER READING

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Lionel Robbins (1963) *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*. Cmnd 2154. London: HMSO.

INTRODUCTION

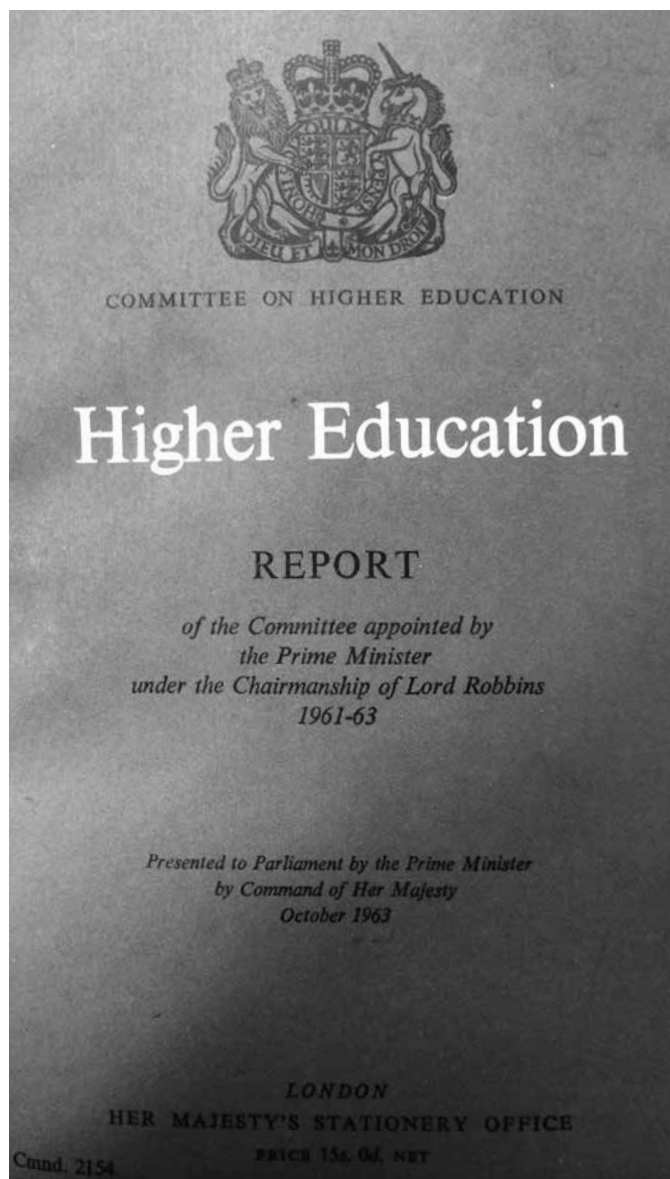
David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science

Text for this introduction reprinted from Chapter 1 of David Willetts (2013), *Robbins Revisited: bigger and better higher education*, London: Social Market Foundation.

The Robbins Report appeared 50 years ago, in October 1963. It was a remarkable year: the country was titillated by the Profumo scandal in June, amazed by the Great Train Robbery in August and staggered by the assassination of JFK in November. Aldous Huxley died but the title of his most famous book, *Brave New World*, was an apt description of the age.

It was a big political year too. On 1 October 1963, Harold Wilson promised the “white heat” of a new technological revolution at the Labour Party Conference. A few days later, during the Conservative Party Conference, Harold Macmillan resigned as Prime Minister citing some health problems. From the vantage point of 2013, the case for a technology-focused industrial strategy still resonates – but there is no parallel crisis in leadership, despite the constraints of coalition.

A fraught process ensued to choose the new Conservative Party leader and therefore Prime Minister. On 19 October, having seen off the other challengers – including R A Butler,



the architect of the post-1944 school system – the peer Alec Douglas-Home took charge. Less than a week later, on 23 October, his new government formally received the Robbins Report, entitled *Higher Education*.

A day later, the new administration accepted Lord Robbins's conclusions in full. This was widely expected. (The previous year's Conservative Party Conference had called on the government "to invest in the future by a rapid and massive development of university and higher technological education".¹) Nevertheless, it was still an epochal moment. According to John Carswell, who held many of the leading administrative posts in higher education policy during his long career: "Only the Beveridge Report ... and the Poor Law Report of 1909 can compete with it for copiousness, cogency, coherence and historical influence."²

In contrast to many other official reports, the impact did not quickly diminish. The Report set the course of British higher education for decades to come.

Nonetheless, the Robbins Report's true influence is often misunderstood or even exaggerated. What is traditionally regarded as the Robbins agenda – mass expansion of higher education – was already well under way by the time the Robbins committee concluded their work. Three features of a national system of mass higher education were rolled out while the Robbins committee were deliberating between 1961 and 1963. These were: a national student support system;

¹ Quoted in Peter Gosden (1983), *The Education System since 1944*, Oxford: Martin Robertson, p 151.

² John Carswell (1985), *Government and the Universities in Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 38.

the beginnings of a national university application system; and the foundation of wholly new universities. We will now examine each of these in turn.

Inter-war Britain had fewer university students than most other western European countries. The intellectual stagnation this could have caused was offset by the migration of academics and thinkers, many of them Jewish, from Nazi Germany. By 1958-59, there were around 100,000 full-time students in English, Welsh and Scottish universities. Just over half were "county scholars" in receipt of Local Education Authority scholarships for fees and living costs. But the application system was a mess because of a dual process. People had to apply to each of their chosen universities and to their local authority for student finance: "it is not unknown for an applicant to be refused an award so near the beginning of the academic year that the university department which he had hoped to enter cannot fill the vacancy thus created."³

Local authorities treated similar students differently. These variations were hard to justify. The number of county scholars for every 10,000 people varied from under 2 in Leeds to over 20 in Cardiganshire in the early 1950s, and the average award ranged from £96 in Bury to £276 in Gloucester.⁴ Such large differences could not be explained solely by the characteristics of the local population. In 1960, after two years' work, an official committee led by Sir Colin Anderson recommended

³ Ministry of Education (1960) *Grants to Students*, London: HMSO, p 13.

⁴ Hansard, 26 July 1954, cols 127-28.

⁵ Nicholas Hillman (2013) 'From grants for all to loans for all: undergraduate finance from the implementation of the Anderson Report (1962) to the implementation of the Browne Report', *Contemporary British History*, 27:3, 2013, pp 249-70.



Lionel Robbins, 1917 (family photograph)

a new system: British residents with two A-Level passes (or equivalent) admitted to first degree (or comparable) courses should receive generous awards for maintenance and tuition that were consistent across the country.⁵

The Anderson committee was inconclusive about whether the grants should be administered locally or nationally. Once implemented by the Education Act (1962), they were administered locally but according to a national formula. Part of the reason for this was to protect university autonomy, as institutions seemed less directly answerable to Whitehall when some of the public funding flowed through arms-length local government. English local authorities only finally lost their residual role in assessing students for financial support in 2011-12, by which time it had come to look like an unnecessary third arm on top of the finance provided by the Student

Loans Company and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The change from the old discretionary system to a standardised and more generous one improved access to university but it also improved the lot of students, who could make more of the opportunities on offer. Between the wars, students typically had to scrape around for funding from a number of different sources. One study identified “the sheer chanciness of the circumstances that allowed many of those in my sample to embark on a university education.”⁶ Jenny Lee, the architect of the Open University, attended Edinburgh University through a combination of support from her local authority, the Carnegie Trust and her parents (who even risked a shilling each way on the Derby to try and help). Her clothes were bought on credit and she was forced to shun student accommodation for the cheaper alternative of renting a room.⁷ Things improved considerably after the war, not least because of the expectations (voluntary not mandatory) that were put on local authorities in the Education Act (1944). But there had still been no certainty of support, nor of its adequacy. In contrast, after 1962, as Robert Anderson has written, “for a whole generation financial problems became a minor concern of university life”.⁸

University applications were put on a national basis for the first time alongside the changes to student support. The Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) was

6 Carol Dyhouse (2002), ‘Going to university in England between the wars: access and funding’, *History of Education*, 31:1, p 12.

7 Carol Dyhouse (2005), *Students: a gendered history*, London: Routledge, p 3.

8 Robert Anderson (2006), *British Universities*, London: Hambledon Continuum, p 139.

created in 1961. Historically, there had been little need for a centralised admissions service because supply and demand for university were fairly evenly matched. Although each individual could apply directly to as many institutions as they liked, multiple applications were rare before the second world war. But increasing competition for places increased the number of applicants making multiple entries. This became unmanageable for applicants and institutions: as one vice chancellor complained in 1957, “no one interested in the selection of students could pretend that the present situation was other than one of deplorable chaos.”⁹

The new clearing house was a response to these problems but it was far from a foregone conclusion. Lord Fulton, the first chairman of UCCA, later recalled:

“In that critically important decade of the 1950s there was ample evidence of the frustration and injustice suffered by the young as a result of the existing methods of selection for entry. The right to choose their students was generally accepted as one of the three chief pillars of university autonomy. Would the individual universities continue to go it alone or would they find ways of collaborating to ease the burdens on the young without sacrifice of fundamental principle? We know the answer now: but it was not so clear at the beginning.”¹⁰

The scheme took effect properly for entry in 1964. Membership by universities was voluntary but even Oxford and Cambridge,

⁹ Sir James Mountford as paraphrased in Ronald Kay (1985) *UCCA: its origins and development 1950-85*, London: UCCA, p 12.

¹⁰ Ronald Kay (1985), *UCCA: its origins and development 1950-85*, p 5.



Members of the Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, including Lionel Robbins, taken during the Committee's visit to Stanford, 1962

which had initially stood aloof, joined for the 1966 entry round onwards. By 1968, UCCA was handling 600,000 applications from 110,000 candidates for 80 institutions. Today, its successor the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) handles 2,600,000 applications from 650,000 candidates for 310 institutions. (This includes 550,000 UK applicants and 141 UK universities.)

Meanwhile, the sector was growing. The University Grants Committee (UGC), the ancestor of today's higher education funding councils, debated the merits and consequences of university expansion in detail long before Robbins. At the start of the 1960s, the UGC agreed around 170,000 university places would be necessary by the early 1970s. Although this was a lower figure than the Robbins committee later came up with, it was sufficient to focus minds. Because existing

universities were not keen to deliver all the extra places, there was an unprecedented opportunity to bring some embryonic ideas to life. New universities were established in Sussex (1961), East Anglia (1963), York (1963), Lancaster (1964), Essex (1964), Kent (1965) and Warwick (1965). Keele University was founded in 1962, though its origins owe more to an academic debate about modern forms of higher education than to the numbers game.

Previously, universities had emerged bottom up; a college with deep local roots would seek to graduate to full university status. The UGC's approach was radically different. According to Michael Shattock: "This was a unique operation in British higher education history, where the state intervened to create wholly new universities, which had no back history of predecessor institutions, on green field sites."¹¹

Prior to the 1960s, civic universities recruited their students locally, students applied somewhat haphazardly to a host of institutions and it was very hard to realise local demand for a new university. That was changing even before Robbins picked up his pen. Without the concurrent decisions of the Macmillan government to implement a national grant system and of universities to institute a proper national admissions system, the UK could have gone down the continental route of local higher education, with grants determined by local authorities and with universities exclusively serving their local communities. Instead, what developed was a national sector of autonomous universities with countrywide recruitment patterns and national student support rules; you could apply for full-time undergraduate study relatively easily

¹¹ Michael Shattock (2012), *Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945-2011*, London: Institute of Education, p 43.

anywhere in the country, with a generous LEA grant in tow. National government set the terms of the financial support and local government paid it out, but universities had autonomy over who studied where, and so in practice determined who received the support. It was a crucial divergence from the localist and regionalist models common in many countries, including the United States, France and Germany. England remains an outlier compared to its European neighbours in this and other respects.

Although the university world was changing fast, there were still unresolved questions. Two in particular stood out. First, there was little accountability for a sector that was receiving ever greater sums of public money and which was made up of individual institutions that received an unprecedented proportion of their income from the state. HM Treasury had responsibility for universities within government. The funding was distributed via the UGC. This was a structure designed to protect institutional autonomy. Yet, as a Treasury official told an early meeting of the Robbins committee, "The Chancellor was put in an invidious position – given the present scale of expenditure – when he had to go beyond his normal role of arbiter to become advocate for one particular item of expenditure."¹²

Secondly, the higher education system as a whole looked messy and unco-ordinated. There was a lack of clarity over the status of, and relationship between, universities, colleges of advanced technology, colleges of education, regional colleges and others.

Above all, it was not yet clear whether or not the UK had a national *system* of higher education. After Robbins, no one doubted it.

¹² National Archives (1961), ED 116/1, Thomas Padmore, Robbins Committee Minutes 4, 14 April 1961, 2.



Lord and Lady Robbins: Naming of the Lionel Robbins Building, 27 July 1978

1 WHAT WAS THE WORLD LIKE THEN? THE CONTEXT IN 1963

Richard Layard

I would like to talk about the situation before the Robbins Committee was set up, and why it was set up in the first place. There were two huge changes going on which led to the establishment of the inquiry. The first was the aftermath of Sputnik and the very strong feeling in all countries that the future of the nation depended on its technological capacity and therefore on the manpower that could produce that technology. The second was quite different and was the pressure of the young people wanting to go to university and the fact that it was becoming increasingly difficult for people of given qualifications to get into a university.

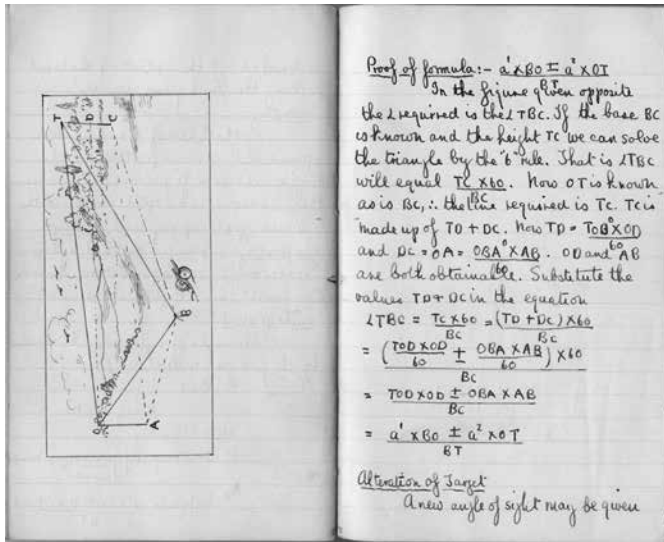
So you had two strands, the manpower needs strand and the demand for places strand. And of course the main issue facing the Committee was how to think about planning the future higher education system. Should it be done so as to meet the manpower needs of the country as best they could be estimated, or should it be done to meet the demand for places coming from young people? So let me say a bit about each of those aspects of the debate.

Manpower needs approach

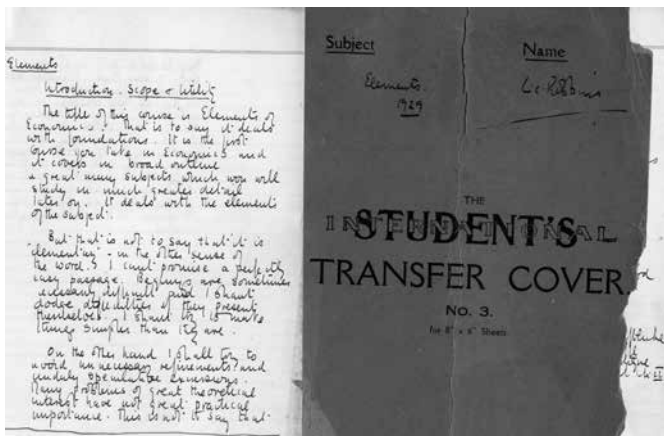
I shall never forget seeing Sputnik crossing the night sky when I was a student at Cambridge. It made an incredible impression and it transformed the way in which people in the West thought about their society. As we know, within three years the USA had launched its counter-offensive through the Apollo programme to place a man on the moon before 1970. But every country was re-appraising its technological capacity because more than ever it was felt that this would determine the success of the nation.

At the same time, there was a revolution under way in economics, led by Gary Becker at University of Chicago, which was identifying education as a major factor in economic performance and showing that there were quite good returns to higher education as an investment. So from that side too we were getting a new focus on educated people as an input to the productive process.

When you compared Britain with other countries we were, in terms of highly educated manpower, behind the USA and the USSR, though we were not behind many other countries. But the pressure for expanding our scientific manpower capacity was intense. We had the scientific manpower committee chaired by Solly Zuckermann which was estimating the manpower needs of the country. At the same time, there were intellectuals like Charles Snow and Sir Geoffrey Crowther pushing a similar line, and shortly before the Committee was set up, Sir Geoffrey Crowther, former editor of *The Economist* had given the famous lecture where he said that our present higher education policy was a "formula for national decline".



Artillery notebook kept by Lionel Robbins, 1916



Notes by Lionel Robbins for his lecture series on "Elements of economics", 1929

But of course not everybody agreed with this analysis and as you can imagine, the sceptics were led from the Treasury. I remember vividly the first day I arrived in my office at the Robbins Committee, a paper arrived from the Treasury written by Otto Clarke, a Deputy Secretary and father of the politician Charles Clarke. It said that we now have just over 4 per cent of the population going to university but could one really imagine that there would be graduate level jobs for more than 2 per cent of the population. Now most people I think could see that there was a growing demand for graduate labour in the labour market and they could see that this in turn was raising the relative wages of graduates. And this in turn was tending to make more and more young people think about going to university. So that brings me to the demand for places.

Demand for places

If you look at the demand for places we see that there were rising numbers of people with two or more A-levels, which was considered the minimum qualification at that time. But we also see that the number of young people accepted for places at university was rising a lot more slowly. So the result was that over a five-year period the ratio of first-year university entrants to qualified school leavers had fallen by about a quarter. This naturally created huge political pressure from the young people but also from aspiring middle class parents. On top of that, there was the demographic explosion looming. The children born just after the war were now in their teens and they were moving rapidly towards the age of university entry. And an obvious question was, would you deny them places just on the basis of what you thought the manpower needs of the country were?

The Committee's approach

So the Committee had to choose between these two approaches to the planning of higher education and, in my view quite rightly, they adopted the demand for places approach. I think that the approach was right then and is right now and of course it only makes sense on three conditions. The first condition is that the degree of subsidisation for students in higher education is right. So it must allow adequately for the external benefits which a person can place on society through getting educated, including of course the higher taxes he or she will pay. But we should also take into account the fact that people going to university are likely to be the most successful and better paid in the society, and that equity argument puts some limit on the degree of subsidy which is reasonable. Second, there must be suitable courses being offered for students to be demanding. And third, the students must have good information about what those courses are and what different courses could lead to.

So let me just comment on those three conditions and say whether I agree with the way that the Robbins Committee approached them. First the subsidy issue. I think the Robbins Committee was right at the time to argue for a high ongoing level of subsidy. This was an infant industry which was still unknown to most of the population. It was good to make it attractive at that stage and it could be afforded. As time has gone on, the infant industry argument has diminished and it has been right to shift the burden of cost more onto students than was recommended at that time when the system was very much smaller and less costly than it has become. I support the situation of university students paying more of the cost now. But I would question the degree to which students in arts

and humanities are paying money that in fact cross-subsidises science and technology. This is a hark back to the manpower needs approach. Second, on the question of course structure, the Robbins Committee argued for much more availability of broad courses ranging across arts and social science and actual science. That was one of the recommendations which fell flat on the ground. Universities have been moving in the opposite direction. I came to think that it would have been much more successful if the problem had been more specifically identified as the failure of people in arts and social sciences to be adequately competent in quantitative methods. The result of the last 50 years has been that we are still producing huge numbers of highly educated arts and social science graduates many of whom are completely unquantitative and hardly know the difference between 100 and 1,000. There's still time to rectify that and in 2001 the Department of Education was moving towards getting all university applicants from school to take a Use of Maths AS-level paper which would become a standard entry requirement. It would be great if this could be taken up again. Further to this adequate information is needed – students are still not given very good information about what the implications are of taking different university courses and this is essential in order that an approach based on the demand for places produces a sensible outcome.

The pool of ability

So having adapted the demand for places approach, the Committee had to forecast what that demand would be likely to be. And they looked ahead for 20 years in their forecast. If only social policy was based on more long-term thinking and forecasting today. At the time it was important to do that because there was a big issue about how many new institutions

should be created or upgraded and the government could only take a view on that in light of the size of the system. And that takes us straight to the issue of the projection: how many people would be likely to be able to reach the qualifications at which they could benefit from higher education. There was already a lively debate going on around this issue before the Committee started its work and a leading sceptic was W D Furneaux who had just published a book called *The Chosen Few* which calculated the maximum number of people who could ever benefit from higher education. This is what he said: "Let's take children from the professional classes and see what percentage of them go to university from within each ability level." Now let's assume that those are the maximum proportions of people with each ability level who could ever go to university and then find out how many would go to university if that maximum is reached in all social classes. The answer is 7.5 per cent. That was estimated as the maximum number of people who could ever have the qualifications to go to university.

Well it didn't take a genius to see that more children in professional classes were still going to university every year and indeed that has, of course, continued almost to the present time and the percentage point increase in university entry has been much the same in all social classes. Moreover, at the time women were only a



Richard Layard c 1963

quarter of university students and it was quite obvious that achievement rates and enrolments rates among women were going to rise very much faster than among men. So we were able to demolish the pool of ability approach and doing that is certainly one of the things I most enjoyed in all our work. It may have been ultimately the most important thing that emerged in the Robbins Committee.

So what the Committee did was to extrapolate up to 1985 and it turned out to be pretty accurate. But what was happening was something similar to the hog cycle in agriculture: you start off from a shortage of educated people that leads to high relative wages and people flood into universities; then around the end of the 70s you begin to get a surplus, the relative wages of graduates start falling and there's a slowdown in university entry; a shortage then develops and a new surge towards the end of the 80s. But I think that, beginning where we started, our forecasting record was pretty impressive.

Let me end with three very quick and very different issues.

Institutions

One huge issue facing the Committee was the relationship between the universities and teacher training and further education. A decision had already been taken to make the training of primary school teachers into a three-year course. There were those who thought that the teacher training course should be fully incorporated in the universities. Similarly, they thought that where education colleges were giving degree level courses, those colleges should also be incorporated in universities. This was debated very fully and it was decided to adopt a solution where there were links

between these other institutions and universities of a closer kind but without complete incorporation. That was the so-called binary system and bit by bit we have been moving to a more unified system. I think that evolution has made a lot of good sense, but institutions should have to prove themselves before they can be upgraded.

Staff-student ratio

A second huge issue of course was the staff-student ratio. The ratio at the time was about 1 to 8 and it is of course now about half as good as it was then. Robbins did come out in favour of the existing staff-student ratio and again this may have been appropriate at the time but it has become increasingly necessary to have changes, partly because we can't afford what we used to have when higher education was a much smaller system. But also, technology has moved on and has made it much more possible to provide good teaching with a smaller number of staff per student.

Research

The last item I want to mention is research. This was not discussed at very great length in the Report. There was a general feeling that things were good in that department with a more serious issue being how to improve teaching. But what happened was, I think, extremely serious for the Western world as regards social science and humanities. In these disciplines at the time Britain was quite a leading player. But since then they have come to be dominated almost totally by research and writing done in America. This turned out to be very bad for the world, including America, and led to the development of a business model in American business schools that eventually led to the crash of 2008. But it has also not been good for

social policy to have models based on America becoming the main player of intellectual debate and the rest of the world. Robbins did not foresee this development and certainly made no recommendations that could have stopped it and I have to say that I see very little being done to try to reverse this very serious situation. Possibly some generous billionaire can help but it also needs a much more serious government approach to the arts and social sciences. It is indeed quite ironic that natural science, which is much more expensive, has held its own in Europe far better than social science, even though it is more important that social science should have local validity than that natural science should have.

The Report did of course discuss many other issues. It came out in the pre-election year and we all knew that it would be accepted and that is one of many reasons why it was so exciting to work on. It was an amazing experience to work for Claus Moser who was both demanding and enormously appreciative and I've been trying to follow his example ever since. It was also inspiring to work for Lionel Robbins whose approach to the whole subject was totally open-minded as he was determined that the whole report should be based on evidence. So, as I experienced it coming in as an outsider, my whole two-and-a-half years working for Robbins felt like a great voice of discovery and I feel enormously privileged to have been involved in something which I think has done so much good in the world.

2 THE REPORT

Claus Moser

I find it very moving that this event takes place here, at LSE. It's very appropriate because Lionel was a passionate believer in LSE, spending most of his life here. If I had my way I would just talk about him as a wonderful man, but that's not my role. My role is to say a few words about the Committee, and how we worked and what we did. I'm not going to talk about the relevance of Robbins to today's problems, much though I would like to, but you will have seen that David Willetts has published a major pamphlet¹ which goes into the subject, so you can read it for yourselves.

Now the Committee: this is the Report [holds up a copy] – or, rather, this is *the* Report, because with it go 10 volumes of appendices, which tells you something of the work we did. There was a research team, which Richard Layard and I led. There were 12 committee members, including Lionel; there were two secretaries; and there was me. I think I am right in saying, sadly, that I am the only survivor. Actually, even that statement is a bit controversial, in the sense that the

¹ David Willetts (2013), *Robbins Revisited: bigger and better higher education*, London: Social Market Foundation, from which the Introduction to this book is drawn.

government's main social science journal (which I hope you all read), in an issue seven years ago started the main article with the sentence: "In the words of the *late* Sir Claus Moser ... ". And just in case anybody might be misled, later on in the same article, said: "As Professor Claus Moser wrote a year before he died ... ". I'm hoping that by the time I finish you will not think that they were right.

We worked unbelievably hard. I think I attended every one of the 111 meetings, and certainly the seven journeys abroad. And we visited lots of universities and colleges in this country. It was hard work, but for me – and perhaps for many people on the Committee – certainly the most exhilarating, most challenging work I have ever done. And of course Lionel was the most wonderful person to work with. I was totally devoted to him throughout the rest of my life. I'm happy to say this in the presence of his daughter, whom I am very pleased to see here.

Lionel was a very unusual gentleman, in my experience at any rate. There was quite a lot of disagreement at the start of the process about the issue of enlargement of the student population. By no means all of the members of the Committee were onside – I'll come back to that in a moment. I don't know how to summarise what was so special about Lionel as a chairman, because there is no doubt in my mind that this is very much the Robbins Report.

What I think is that this man seemed to have unstoppable concentration. I keep on losing my way in readings, but not Lionel. He seems to have taken in every word that was said. Moreover, he remembered what people had said in a previous

meeting, so when we saw one of our 110 witnesses in person (not to mention the 400 documents we received from outside), he would not only question people with extraordinary insight, but would remember at a later meeting what they had said; and I found that very impressive.

He was a very powerful interviewer, very focused and very courteous, even when he thought the witness was talking absolute rubbish (and certainly some of them did). All the interviews we took are published, and some of them make very good reading now. I have re-read quite a few recently, and there are also a number of written contributions in the volumes that are well worth reading. Bill Bowen, the distinguished late American economist and his views on how to measure education was a classic. And Jean Floud and Chelly Halsey's work on social mobility was another classic. Anyway, Lionel's qualities as an interviewer and as a rememberer were quite extraordinary, and I think that because of that we had a more or less unanimous committee (I say "more or less" because there was one minority report, which disagreed with what we said about the machinery of government). But otherwise the Report was agreed, and that was really Lionel's achievement again.

What he did at the end was to disappear to his little country house on the sea, where he wrote the Report more or less by himself. He then brought it back, and as we had been sitting for nearly two-and-a-half years, Committee members were more brave in standing up to him. He had a very bad run on the draft committee report. I sat next to him, and noticed that he didn't write anything down, but took it all in, went back for the weekend, and brought back a rewritten version



Lionel Robbins in Lyme Regis working on the Robbins Report, 1962 (family photograph)

which more or less is what you have here. I think he loved writing, and he wrote very well and very subtly, so that again was an achievement.

As for the statistics, Richard and I will need no reminder that it was a tough task, above all the expansion, which Richard has talked about, but also much else. We did a lot of new surveys. Why did we do so? In Lionel's view, our job was not just to help the Committee, but to address the fact that the public was under-informed about higher education. They ought to get all relevant statistics. It was truly a social scientist's report.

As an experience for committee members it must have been fairly shattering some of the time because, as I said, he achieved unanimity. There were one or two people who opposed expansion. Helen Garden was a very distinguished

English academic and was against, and so were one or two others. But more people on the Committee were impatient to bring about expansion – Richard hinted at this – in terms of manpower needs. In other words, why should we expand? Because the country needs more engineers, or more doctors, or more historians, or whatever. Now, Lionel had no time for manpower forecasts, and simply would have none of it. Though there were people on the Committee who said that we should not expand, this view was brushed aside, and it was Lionel who pushed us to the other extreme.

I repeat once more what Richard referred to: our golden rule was that places in higher education should be available to all those suited by ability and attainment, and who wished to attend. And the statisticians had the task of estimating that. Although it can now be said that the door was sort of open to expansion politically (and there was the Anderson report beforehand and so on), there is no doubt at all that it was our work on what we called the “pool of ability” that turned the corner. The statistical volume was just as big as the Report itself. If you want to read a simpler version, Richard Layard and I wrote a Penguin about how we did the pool of ability work.

The work was quite complicated. It is not just a question of demographic forecasts, but also a question of ability, attainment, desires, etcetera, and we did our best. We did the sums and the estimates with all the care and accuracy and skill we were capable of. I would give more credit to my colleague Richard and to myself for bringing it off, but the reason we brought it off was because the work persuaded Lionel Robbins. And once Lionel was persuaded that these numbers – a considerable increase by 1980 – made sense, he

persuaded the Committee, not totally, but enough for them to vote for the Report in the end.

And not just that, but also with the extraordinary result that the government accepted the Robbins Report within 24 hours of publication. I don't think that has ever happened before or since. It was a remarkable achievement, I think, for the Committee to really back this expansion.

I seem to remember that the most powerful voices in favour of expansion (but I may be wrong after 50 years – I was already really quite old then), were the then head of Imperial College, who was on the Committee, and the Vice Chancellor of Leeds, who was very powerful, and also the head of the Institute of Education – but I may do injustice to people who are dead. Anyway, it happened. And as we all know, there is now a rise in numbers quite incomparable with that rise, and Mr Willetts in his pamphlet says quite a lot about that.

Although in terms of action, expansion was the headline and the change that sort of changed the world in this country, I want also to list what to me, but not perhaps only to me, seemed the small number of other major things in the Report which are so vital and have so much meaning today.

Number one: Lionel took great care throughout – and we had to do likewise as statisticians – not just to deal with universities. We dealt with teacher training – it doesn't mean that the government then dealt with it – also with FE, and so on; and throughout the report, and throughout the statistics, we always distinguished those categories.

Secondly, there was a certain confidence, perhaps misjudged, that the government purse would go on doing its bit, which it was doing then. Well, it wasn't to be, and I think it can be argued that the Robbins Report is a little bit too lightweight on finance. We'll hear more about that later. Lionel was certainly against loans at the beginning, but he later changed his mind and said so, but it's not the strongest part of the Report.

Thirdly, and still important reading today, is the discussion of the machinery of government and the vital necessity for universities to have their independence and complete autonomy. The Committee believed in the University Grants Committee of the time, and that's a very important part of the Report.

Next, interestingly enough, quite a lot of attention is given to the relation between universities and schools.

Fifth, and last: there is no doubt that in Lionel's own mind, teaching came top. Not that he ignored research – of course not. The report is quite careful to deal with both as two sides of the same coin, but Lionel's passion was teaching. The Higher Education Minister interviewed me and Richard recently, and I told him a true story which Lionel had told me himself:

At one stage, when Lionel was head of the Economics Department, he told the Director at the time, Sir Sydney Caine, that he had to give up a certain amount of his LSE work, but one thing he was never going to drop was first-year teaching, which was a passion of his. Without wanting to do down research, things have changed massively, and it is interesting that the newspapers in welcoming Mr Willett's



Claus Moser c1963

report – both the *Guardian* and the *Times* – stressed that the Minister seemed to be allying himself with this emphasis on teaching.

Coupled with that, the Robbins Report had a very strong element on anti-specialisation. Lionel himself was the least specialised of men. He liked to quote Adam Smith, who wrote: “the economist who is only an economist (unless, of course, he’s a genius) is not much use to society even as an economist.” It’s a very good quote, which Lionel liked, and he very much based himself on that, and there’s a great deal in the Report on anti-specialisation. I read the Report now, and chapter two is about his own work. I should have said that the Committee’s own ideals and principles were that the student, undergraduate and of course graduate, is centre stage – and to my mind, there’s no doubt about that.

So as I look back on it, I must admit to great personal pride that Richard and I, and other researchers, were so closely tied up in it for two-and-a-half years or more; and I gave hundreds of lectures afterwards on the subject, and Lionel and we dedicated books to each other, and Lionel truly became a central part of my life. I would recommend for today’s reading especially the ideals and principles in the early chapter, which undoubtedly changed the tone of discussion at the time. It is a great joy to me that the discussion has reopened 50 years hence.

3 WHAT HAPPENED LATER? THE BRITISH ROAD TO MASS HIGHER EDUCATION

David Watson

Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this important anniversary – for LSE and for higher education in the UK. I am very honoured to be on the same panel as two of my heroes, Claus Moser and Richard Layard, who have evoked the circumstances and the achievement of the Robbins Report so effectively.

This is how I how I plan to answer the question set by Nick Barr – “what happened next?”

What exactly happened in the UK? How we became a mass higher education system, and why we haven't managed to be a “universal” system, is a complicated story. I would like to approach it through four main lenses, as follows:

- rates and types of participation
- paying for it
- legislative attempts at control (and their mixed record of success)
- institutional dynamics

Bridging with the next session of the conference, I'll conclude with a (very) few remarks on where it leaves us today, exactly 50 years after Robbins. Since time is short, I'm going to rely mostly on some simple charts (I was tempted just to put them up and let them speak for themselves).

For Martin Trow, famously, national higher education systems lose their "elite" designation when the participation of each age cohort rises above 15 per cent. Anything between that and 40 per cent is "mass" higher education. Above 40 it became "universal," although without fanfare in the mid-1980s Trow revised that particular milestone to 50 per cent. In his, and others' use of these terms, there is a strong sense of civilisation being abandoned at that point. However, as every schoolboy knows, there is an element of Canute on the beach about these projections. Most developed systems have burst through the barriers, and those that haven't would like to.

Even with the usual pre-fee rise spike the UK is stuck at 49 per cent. The figure is significantly higher in Scotland – at 55 per cent – although it is very dependent there on sub-degree qualifications. Across the UK, female participation is universally about ten points higher than male.¹

Even with this spike, the OECD's *Education at a Glance* would have us behind Korea, Japan, Canada, the Russian Federation, Ireland, Norway and New Zealand for young persons' participation and behind another slew of major "competitors"

¹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2013), *Participation Rates in Higher Education: academic years 2006-07 to 2011-12*, paras 2-6. London: BIS, provisional, 24 April.

(like the United States, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Hungary and Spain) on the lifetime measure of tertiary attainment.²

Lionel Robbins and his report inaugurated Great Britain's version of mass higher education. He wanted a bigger and a fairer system. To take "bigger" first, in Trow-like terms, he envisaged a shift from an APR of about 8 per cent in 1963 (about 216,000 students) to 17 per cent (about 560,000 students) in 1980.³ Remember those numbers.

Meanwhile on "fairness," as Paul Temple wrote eloquently in the *Times Higher* in July, there was no going back on the enunciation of his principle of the "ability to benefit", even though it has meant a struggle – still not complete – to bring it about.⁴ Claus Moser has referred to this as "the golden rule". The shortest expression of the formula in the Report is that "all applicants with appropriate qualifications should have places".⁵

More has emphatically not meant worse. The system we now have is significantly better, in all sorts of ways, to the system he and his colleagues surveyed as they began work. That said, the government of the day didn't follow his advice (they never do, even though they say they will), he left some important unfinished business, and the road has not been smooth.

2 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2012) *Education at a Glance: highlights*, figure 1.2, p 13.

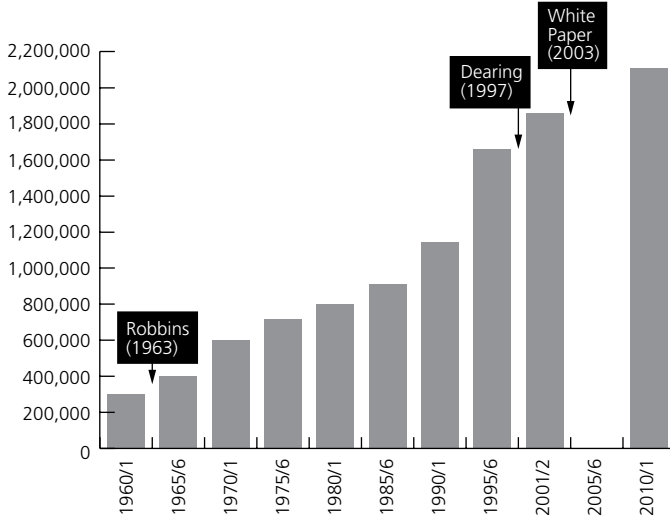
3 Lionel Robbins (1963) *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*. Cmnd 2154, pp 268-72. London: HMSO.

4 P Temple (2013) 'Here's to class act that challenged tyranny of class in admissions', *Times Higher Education*, 11 July, pp 26-27.

5 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 265.

“Mass” participation

Here’s the big story. These are student numbers (not FTE) between 1960 and 2010.

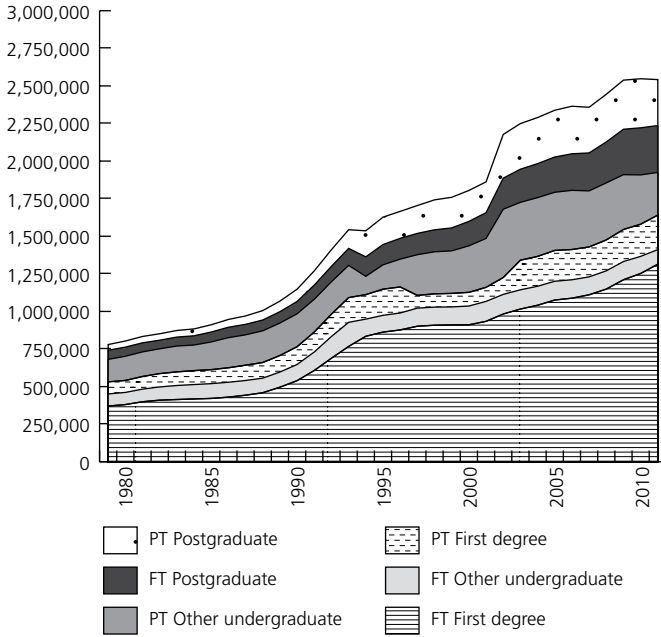


We have experienced essentially two “spurts”, in each of which the system doubled in size: after Robbins and before Dearing. Crudely, Robbins was invited to have a vision but Dearing had to make sense of a reality.

The related APR reached 12.5 per cent by Robbins’ target date of 1980 (remember his 17 per cent), about 32 per cent by 1995 and about 42 per cent by 2005.

But, as you would expect, the picture is more complicated than that. Robbins focused almost exclusively on young full-time students on first degrees, mostly living away from home. He did have concerns about postgraduate study,⁶ about part-timers and adult education (including what he termed

Number of HE students by mode of study and level of course, 1979-2011



Source: DES 1991-92; DFE 1994; HESA 1996-2013

“refresher courses for graduates in industry ... courses for married women wishing to start or resume their careers after bringing up a family, as well as more general courses for those wishing to enlarge their intellectual and aesthetic horizons”.⁷ But he would have been surprised by the shape of the system we have in fact built. From 1994-95 onwards a majority of students has not been on full-time first degrees.

6 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 279.

7 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 273.

What does this picture mean?

Paradoxically the UK has established a position as one of the most lifelong learning-friendly systems in Europe, with, for example, a strong record in admitting mature students: 31 per cent of first-time undergraduates are aged over 21 on entry, and 14 per cent over 30.⁸ In 2003 Brian Ramsden compared the characteristics of British undergraduates with the *Euro Student 2000* survey and established that we had the highest proportion of part-timers, the oldest average age, the highest rate of reported disabilities, and the second-highest representation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (after Finland).⁹ Meanwhile the overall pattern of participation in higher education has nearly defeated the politicians' almost exclusive emphasis on the young, full-time undergraduate student. More than half of current registrations are now on other modes and levels of study, with the fastest rate of growth at the second cycle.

Paying for it: fees and funding

On fees and funding, the story is more complicated than we sometimes want to admit. The biggest spurt of development (you could call it the Baker/Clarke system) was very significantly paid for by divide and rule. In effect the traditional universities cartelised in the face of an invitation to bid competitively for growth; the public sector had different ideas; and then the two systems were combined from the late 1980s. The effect was crudely to halve the amount of funding available per

⁸ D McVitty and K Morris (2012) *Never Too Late to Learn; mature students in higher education*, pp 7-8, London: Million+ and National Union of Students (NUS).

⁹ B Ramsden (2003) 'Euro student 2000: comparisons with the United Kingdom'. In M Slowey and D Watson (eds) *Higher Education and the Lifecourse*, pp 3-19, Maidenhead: SRHE and Open University Press.

student. This was also the era in which the so-called “public sector” (of non-university higher education) became a majority.

UK unit public funding, 1979-2003

Year	INDEX		
	University	HEFCE	Polytechnic
1979/80	100		100
1980/81	106		99
1981/82	103		94
1982/83	106		89
1983/84	107		82
1984/85	106		79
1985/86	103		78
1986/87	102		79
1987/88	105		76
1988/89	103		75
1989/90	100	100	–
1990/91		91	
1991/92		86	
1992/93		80	
1993/94		75	
1994/95		73	
1995/96		70	
1996/97		65	
1997/98		64	
1998/99		63	
1999/2000		63	
2000/01		62	
2001/02		63	
2002/03		63	

This is exactly how Martin Trow's nightmare became a reality.

And this was the context that led to the Dearing Report in 1996-97. When the Committee was set up there was a real sense of crisis in UK higher education. There was also a sense of paralysis within the major political parties in terms of what to do about it, not least when in the spring and summer of 1996 institutions threatened to break the mould of traditionally free higher education for full-time students by charging top-up fees. Extraordinarily the parties then colluded in order to take the issue out of the 1997 General Election. (They did the same in 2010 with Browne. In fact we have never had a political party going to the polls calling for new or higher fees.)

In response Dearing broke a mould at least as significant as Robbins's. There is a "killer" chart in the Report.¹⁰ This showed total expenditure on higher education in real terms modestly rising between 1979 and 1995, from about £5.4 billion to just over £7.1 billion. However, easily the fastest element of growth in this period was on student maintenance and loans. Capital spending on universities was flat, and recurrent expenditure and publicly resourced fees rose only slightly, from £4 billion to about £4.5 billion. The Committee's conclusion was that, in a context of increased spending on higher education in real terms between 1979 and 1995, the funding of institutions to provide education and research was effectively flat-lined. In those circumstances, we bit the bullet and suggested that domestic (and as was soon established, EU) students should make a modest contribution (about 25 per cent of the costs) to their education (Robbins had suggested that the target

¹⁰ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (the Dearing Report), chart 3.14, London: HMSO.

¹¹ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 274.

should be 20 per cent, although he proposed no immediate action).¹¹ And the rest is history.

I don't have time to pursue the full vicissitudes of the subsequent story, but do want to make two editorial comments. The first is that every serious debate about funding higher education institutions in the UK morphs almost overnight into a single question, about support for full-time undergraduate students, and that this issue then effectively crowds out all of the others. The second is that our latest framework (you could call it "Willetts-Clegg") will, in effect, as forecasts are forced to fall on the amount of money that will be paid back on what is in effect a very generous loan scheme (the so-called RAB charge), reverse the situation created post-Dearing. More and more public money will be needed to plug this gap, and less will be available to support the system as a whole. Stefan Collini has written effectively about this in the current *London Review of Books* (24 October). *The New York Post* was blunter about a similar dilemma relating to federal government loans on 6 June 2000. They had a headline – much plagiarised since – "Sub-prime goes to college".

Legislative hyperactivity

That is emblematic of my third major point about the British route to mass higher education. Robbins also, and inadvertently, inaugurated the UK's experience as the most "tinkered with" by national government in the world. In 2005 Rachel Bowden and I advanced the proposition that we have been the fruit-flies of the international system, with the Australians running in a not very close second place.¹² The contrast is with the turtles (like Switzerland).

¹² D Watson and R Bowden (2005) *The Turtle and the Fruitfly: New Labour and UK higher education*. Brighton: University of Brighton Education Research Centre.

UK GOVERNMENT HE INITIATIVES SINCE 1963: TWELVE FRAMEWORKS

1. 1963: the Robbins Report – creation of “new” universities, “ability to benefit”
2. 1965: the Woolwich speech – creation of the polytechnics
3. 1972: the James Report – reorganisation of teacher training, “diversification”
4. 1980-85: the Tory cuts – withdrawal of “overseas” subsidy, Green Paper on contraction and rationalisation
5. 1985: the National Advisory Body for Public Sector HE (NAB), “capping the pool,” centralisation of local authority HE
6. 1988: the Great Education Reform Act – incorporation of the polytechnics, central institutions and large colleges
7. 1992: Further & Higher Education Act – ending of the binary line, Funding Councils for devolved administrations, creation of the “new new” universities
8. 1997: the Dearing Report – fees for full-time undergraduate students
9. 2004: Higher Education Act – variable fees, “new new new” universities, foundation degree awarding powers for FECs
10. 2009: Higher Ambitions – New Labour’s parting shot
11. 2010: the Browne Review – higher undergraduate fees, new student contribution system
12. 2011: Students at the Heart of the System

To put the point crudely, for every third entry of a cohort into the system since then, the system has been thrown up into the air by a government claiming that it is fixing the sins of the previous administration (including sometimes its own party). This might not matter so much if there were a well-understood direction of travel, or a consistently articulated final goal. Instead we have had violent “mood swings” on issues like the size of and provision for the sector, both within and across governments of differing stripes. So the story hasn’t been unidirectional, like, for example, the inexorable march of the NHS towards privatisation.

Instead it has resulted in wild lurches between expansion and contraction (the latter usually termed – after John Patten – “consolidation”), radical changes of mind about institutional status (and the question of what a “university” is), moral panics over dumbing down, subject choices, graduate skills, and debt; the “quality wars”; and a discourse about “world-classness” that flatly contradicts most of the social and economic goals being set for higher education by regional and national strategies (themselves increasingly influenced by devolution).

Institutional dynamics

It has also put pressure on the peculiar pattern we have of institutional types in the UK. Peter Scott tried to make sense of this in the mid-90s, when he identified 12 “sub-groups” of universities in his seminal work, *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*.¹³ One of them (no. 5) he had to call *sui generis*. I have attempted to bring this typology up to date. Against

¹³ P Scott (1995) *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, pp 45-53, Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

this background, it is remarkable how hard the system has fought to maintain some sense of a controlled reputational range (principally through quality assurance, and the peculiarly British phenomenon of external examination – also exported to parts of the Commonwealth) and how resolutely governments have acted to undermine this – while saying that they are doing the opposite.

UK types of university (after Scott, 1995)

1. Oxford and Cambridge
2. University of London
3. Victorian/Edwardian Civics
4. Redbricks
5. Isolates: eg Durham and Keele
6. Technological (ex CAT)
7. Open University
8. Specialised/monotechnic
9. Old new (1960s)
10. New new (1992)
11. New new new (2004)
12. Mixed economy (HE in FE)
13. Private: Buckingham
14. For profit

One outcome is that a more traditional typology of institutions has been radically altered. Looking at this scheme and testing it against the reality of life in a large British universities today, the truth is that we are all hybrids now. You won't find any large institution any longer that is *purely* one of these models.

The modern university: key types

1. The international research university
2. The professional formation university
3. The “curriculum innovation” university
4. The distance/open learning university
5. The college
6. The specialised/single subject HEI
7. The “for profit” corporation

Where are we now?

Pointing forward to this afternoon’s discussions, I draw one very simple conclusion: if UK higher education is going to prosper in the contemporary world, it is going to have to become messier, less precious, more flexible, and significantly more co-operative.

To take a worked example, we are going to have to be more like one half of the North American system. Politicians and commentators who look at higher education in the USA generally fixate on one or other of two models: the Ivy League (especially Harvard) or the California Masterplan. This polarity points to two different ways of experiencing initial higher education in America, concealed by the “national average” data put out by the OECD and others. Fewer than half of American undergraduate students go to four-year public or private residential colleges and universities and a respectable proportion of these complete their degrees on time. Meanwhile the remaining more than half has a much messier route. They invariably complete their bachelor’s degrees in institutions other than the ones in which they start, with gaps, with a mixture of full- and part-time study, a lot of experience of earning

while learning and, above all, by accumulating credit for what they achieve along the way.¹⁴ Even the most prestigious institutions are ready to accept each other's course credit, to admit students with advanced standing and, essentially, to play the CATs (Colleges of Advanced Technology) game. Because of the success of this messier system, over 60 per cent of the population has a serious experience of tertiary study and in popular culture "college" is positively referenced and valued.

David Blunkett was correct, responding in 1998 not just to Dearing, but also to Kennedy on further education and Fryer on adult education in his green paper *The Learning Age*, in thinking that the UK had the building blocks for a world-leading system of lifelong learning.¹⁵

- Nationally, we had created (as I have tried to show), against the official tide, a remarkably open and responsive higher education system.
- Historically we have led the world in the professional accreditation of higher education qualifications.
- Forty years ago we invented a particularly powerful and effective Open University.
- We have an amazingly innovative formal and informal adult education network. Look, for example, at the University of the Third Age (U3A) with at the time of writing nearly 900 centres and nearly 300,000 learners.

14 T Weko (2004) *New Dogs and Old Tricks: what can the UK teach the US about university education?* Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI).

15 Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1998) *The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain*. London: HMSO.

- By 2015 we shall have raised the school leaving age (and hence the springboard into post-compulsory education) to 18.

But at the same time we have had countervailing obsessions.

- Our discussions about funding higher education always converge on the needs and support of younger, full-time participants, living and studying away from home. Thus the latest, post-Browne, settlement has led to the melting away (in 2011-12) of part-time and mature entrants. While acceptances of applicants aged 18 and younger from the UK fell by 1.7 per cent between 2011-12 and 2012-13, for those aged 20 and over there was a drop of 7.1 per cent. Since 2010-11, part-time undergraduate entrants have fallen by 105,000 (40 per cent), while on postgraduate programmes the fall was 25,000 (27 per cent).¹⁶
- We have a permanent mistrust of the preferences of the student market, embedded in policies that have led to the failure of successive supply-side STEM initiatives.
- We love institutional hierarchies and tolerate their symbiotic relationship with class and income-related status.

We have a fear (verging on paranoia) about regulating the private and for-profit sector to the same standards and levels of the public sector (in case they take away their ball). We have apparently not learned the lesson of Individual Learning Accounts.¹⁷

¹⁶ Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2013) *Higher Education in England: impact of the 2012 reforms*. Bristol: HEFCE Report 2013/03.

¹⁷ National Audit Office (NAO) (2002) *Individual Learning Accounts*. London: Stationery Office, 22 October. See also A King and I Crewe (2013) *The Blunders of Our Governments*, pp 127-40, Croydon: Oneworld.

The big picture is that if we want a system of post-compulsory education with better prospects for achieving our social, economic and cultural goals, we are going to have to take lifelong learning more seriously. This is a challenge that was only just on the radar for Robbins; today it is urgent.

What is more, unlike many other intractable problems for higher education, the solution to this problem is in our hands. It will mean not colluding with resistance to change inside the academy. It will mean restoring mutual respect across a national system that has formally maintained commitments to mutual confirmation of standards throughout a period of massive expansion (what I have called our “controlled reputational range”). Above all, it will mean taking widening participation seriously rather than just pretending that the traditional “royal route” will suddenly open up for new types of student.

4 WHAT HAPPENED LATER? THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Simeon Underwood

David Watson has mapped some of the ways in which the university system has changed between 1963 and now. I want to add a few observations, based on 40 years' experience of the sector. Where David has focused on data, I want instead to look at change in terms of individuals and the university environment.

The financial optimism of the 1960s evaporated quickly. One of my first memories of working in the sector was attending a meeting of the Leeds University Senate in February 1977, which was discussing a decision to freeze all posts as they fell vacant. There was outrage, from the Engineering professors in particular and the Dean of the Medical School. They were not at all mollified by the explanations of Lord Boyle, who was then Vice-Chancellor at Leeds but is perhaps better remembered as Minister for Education between 1962 and 1964 – the period in which the Robbins Report was published.

The financial pressures of the second half of the 1970s were followed very soon afterwards by the early, seemingly hostile moves of the Conservative government elected in 1979 – the introduction of “full fees” for overseas students and

the University Grants Committee letter of 1981-82. These were very traumatic events at the time. But overseas student numbers returned to their previous levels within five years of the new fees regime; and in spite of the cuts they faced in 1982 Salford and Aston universities are still with us – in the case of Salford, thanks in part to the efforts of John Ashworth who went on to become Director of LSE in 1990.

David Watson talked about the changes which have led to mass higher education. One of the most striking features of UK universities in 2013 is how large they are. When I started my professional life at Leeds University in 1977 it had 9,500 students: it now has 31,000. When I moved to York in 1980 it had 3,500 students: it now has 15,000. When I moved to LSE in 2000 it had 7,000 students: it now has 10,500. In the various national and institutional discussions about what is sometimes termed “the student experience”, I am not sure that enough account has been taken of this simple point about the scale of the universities at which students now study. It is no longer possible for a student to engage with an institution as a whole; he or she has to choose between a range of different points of access to incomplete parts of it. On a specific point, government and its agencies are calling for increased “student engagement” within universities: but how can students’ unions and individual students claim to be representative of an ever-increasing student body?

Alongside the growth in size, it seems to me that there has been a growth in architectures. Many new university buildings are designed as grand statements, verging on the grandiose. The scale is not domestic. This seems to me to be different from the thinking through which the new universities of the

1960s were developed – although some of the ambitions of the founding fathers (and they were fathers) of the new 1960s universities seemed ambitious at the time.

Another interesting and important shift has been the change in the balance between teaching and research. I recall Lord Boyle talking about “teaching in an atmosphere of research”: it was a benign concept, which made me think at the time of warm drizzle. Fast forward to *The Guardian* of 21 October 2013:

“Willets argues that Robbins’ vision was one in which research and teaching complemented each other, but that this idea has been lost. ‘Looking back we will wonder how the higher education system was ever allowed to become so lopsided away from teaching.’”

The blog posters were quick to point out that a major driver for this change was the decision by government and its agencies to invent the research selectivity exercise and its successors. There can be little doubt that these have led to profound distortions in institutional behaviour, including in relation to the balance between teaching and research. The ways in which we think about research have become more formalised. It has become so central to institutions’ reputations and finances that it now needs to be managed. University managers think of it and measure it in terms of inputs and outputs. For academic staff, when new policies and practices are proposed in the teaching area, an immediate question is “how will this impact on my research time?”. In extreme cases now, the reward given to academic staff who are outstanding researchers is not to have to teach at all. Academic staff complain elegantly about the very obvious methodological deficiencies of the Research

Assessment Exercise and the Research Excellence Framework. But in privileging research over teaching are these exercises playing to what at least some of those staff actually want?

Another outcome is that the relationship between staff and students has become an area of differing perspectives and expectations. In recent years a significant change has been that academic supervisors are no longer expected to take the lead in supporting their students on anything other than strictly academic matters. The sector has seen a growth in support services – counsellors, dyslexia advisers, mental health specialists, study skills advisers, visa experts – most of them working for the institution centrally rather than in academic departments. Academic staff have been given more space to concentrate on their core functions of teaching delivery and research. But for their part students, while reluctant to think of themselves as customers, do have a strong consumerist ethos: and when they speak about their “learning experience” they do so almost entirely in the context of their programme and their academic department. They want to be taught by permanent faculty – for all their use of social media in their personal lives, they are strikingly sceptical about learning technologies as a replacement for face-to-face interactions in their academic lives. They want a personalised higher education – small classes, opportunities to meet staff and other students, a sense of community and belonging.¹ They want academic staff to know who they are.

¹ Much of the material on what students want is drawn from a survey commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency and carried out in 2012 by Dr Camille Kandiko of King's College London. The survey reports can be found at <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/research/student-experience/student-expectations-perceptions-HE.aspx>

This leads on to another highly visible change over the period since Robbins: the growth in the size of administrations and managements. In some old editions of the *LSE Calendar* which I have looked at, the complete administration fits onto one side. There are plenty of explanations for this growth – the emergence of new forms of regulation, compliance costs of affirmative actions, the transfer of work from academic staff to administrators, a growth in complexity and uncertainty, the pressure to manage universities more “professionally” as they and their balance sheets grow in size, the increased sophistication of management technologies and the costs that go with maintaining them.² This trend is not likely to reverse itself any time soon, not least because there are no signs that government and its agencies intend to deliver on the promise in the 2011 White Paper to strip back excessive regulation. Thus, although there are signs that the academic quality assurance movement may have passed its zenith, we are experiencing the emergence of a new management area in the form of the bureaucratisation of risk – strategic and operational risk registers both for the institution and for its component units, emergency planning, business continuity planning, a visible increase in internal audit activity.

A final change I want to touch on is in the area of institutional governance. Throughout my working life I have returned from time to time to *Power and Authority in British Universities* by Moodie and Eustace, published in 1974. They saw university

² There is an exceptionally interesting discussion of this area from an administrative viewpoint by John Hogan, registrar at Newcastle University (2011): ‘Is higher education spending more on administration and, if so, why?’ in *Perspectives: policy and practice in higher education* (the journal of the Association of University Administrators) 15/1.

governance as an untidy diffusion of responsibilities. "One is not presented with any seat of power; instead one finds focal points for different decision-making processes, in none of which do members of Council have wide discretion." Whatever your position or status in the university, power is always in the next room. But the Jarratt Report of 1985³ tried to controvert this model (if it can be called a model). The first of its ten recommendations called on university Councils "to assert their responsibilities in governing their institutions". Vice-Chancellors were to become Chief Executives as well as academic leaders. Universities were to appoint planning and resources committees, "of strictly limited size" and with lay members, which were to report both to Senate and to Councils. Where Moodie and Eustace see universities as loose federal structures, Jarratt wanted them to operate as strongly centralised systems. Roll forward to 2013. It is possible to see modern university governance as a continuing working through of the tensions between Moodie and Eustace on the one hand and Jarratt on the other. The most recent developments suggest that the latter is perhaps starting to win out, after only a quarter of a century. There is plenty of evidence that academic staff now see governance as increasingly removed from "front line" academic endeavour: but equally, my own sense, for example from trying to persuade academic colleagues to serve on committees, is that they are themselves contributing to this by increasingly dis-engaging from this aspect of university life.

So the idea of the university in 2013 might not be recognisable to Robbins as the idea of the university he was writing about

³ Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (1985), *Report of the Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities*, March 1985. At this distance it is striking that the 12 members of the Committee were all male.

50 years earlier. But there are continuities, notably resilience – a remarkable capacity on the part of individuals and institutions to withstand and/or absorb the many changes the sector has faced between 1963 and now.

5 SHOULD THERE BE A SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

Graeme Wise

Much debate on public policy is rooted in an imagined contest between state and market. Sometimes they are conceived as polar opposites, sometimes as complementarities, sometimes even as mutually productive in the sense that states can bring markets into being, and markets can – and do – shape states. But as far as higher education is concerned, they may well be insufficient instruments to capture what is at stake. Here's Manuel Castells on exactly that point, speaking at City University, London, in 2004:

“The debate on university policy is an ideologically charged debate. There is, on the one hand, the notion that the university has to approach to the market model and become just another business. On the other hand, there is a corporatist reaction within the university to defend the ivory tower ... But even more importantly, the university is the last remaining space of freedom. There's no other space in society, no other, that has not submitted to the power of bureaucracies or government or politics or to market forces.”¹

¹ M Castells (2004) “Universities and Cities in a World of Global Networks”, Sir Robin Birley Memorial Lecture, City University London: 17 March 2004.

Well that was ten years ago, and the debate in Britain has in recent years been still more sharply polarised than it was then. Perhaps what we are missing in that debate is what Professor Castells marks out, by positioning state and market not as opposites to be chosen between, but as common antagonists to the true spirit of the university.

If we stepped further back, to Robbins, we can see that was a time when it was possible for people to believe much more readily than we do today in “grand public systems”. At that time, the new welfare state and the NHS had been more successful than perhaps even their most ardent supporters had hoped. People drew comfort and real, tangible benefit from state bureaucracies, and for a while those bureaucracies worked.

Robbins undoubtedly envisaged a system in the sense that higher education should be government by some common “co-ordinating principles and of a general conception of objectives”, but was immediate in clarifying that his committee did not recommend a system in the sense that the sector should be “planned or controlled from the centre”.² This advice was largely followed by several successive governments. In short, against the fashion of the time, no grand public system of higher education was envisaged, developed, proposed or legislated; not by Lord Robbins, not by Edward Boyle, not by Tony Crosland. Under the latter, there was the development of a much more systematic and

² Lionel Robbins (1963) *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*. Cmnd 2154, p 5. London: HMSO.

government directed subsector of higher education in the form of polytechnics, but even that left a lot of control to individual local authorities and as a system could hardly be described as grand. Certainly the higher education system that emerged was nothing like welfare and health policy, which both represented an overarching, planned approach and were very grand indeed in their conception and scope (and very successful with it). But faced with an overwhelming social, economic and cultural case to support higher education expansion, key figures all had the humility to say one big system would probably do more harm than good.

Can we contrast this with Lord Browne's report? In just 80 or so pages he effectively said "by jove we've solved it" ... "just set up a market, chaps" ... "competition will drive up quality, you see" ... "we can't believe you didn't think of it before!" And that's what the government then did, or at least attempted it, in what has turned out to be a mildly to severely botched policy and implementation, depending on one's point of view. We know the prescription. Create more powerful incentives. Take student choice, and reify it (in fact, deify it). Give them more information – in fact flood them in a monsoon of information. Level the playing field, and bring in new players. And go as fast as you can. Don't wait for reflection or discussion – "we need a new system and we need it now". The Browne Committee worked for less than a year, and despite huge controversy over its recommendations it was debated (not just in Parliament, but more widely as a public debate) for just 58 days before the totemic fees vote. These are uncomfortable facts that we would do well to remember. They are evidence of too much faith and too

much haste being put into a one-grand-system approach. The contrast to Robbins could not be more stark.³

Long-term radicalism is a great thing – and for a lesson on that we need only consider the legacy of Robbins. But you can't take a shortcut to legacy; short-term radicalism is not authentic progress and it can lead to big and costly mistakes. So I think the answer to the question this paper addresses has to be “no”. There should not be a system of higher education, if by system we mean a single approach taken without scepticism, without caution, and without allowing for contingency.

The current experiment with an all-encompassing market-based system has not displaced a lumbering, state-planned bureaucracy for higher education in Britain, because that never existed. It never came into being, partly because of path dependencies (nobody was ever going to nationalise Oxbridge or the civics, for example), and partly because wiser heads prevailed. And today the market experiment is not doing a lot of good. In many ways it is failing on its own terms, with a bizarre price function whereby almost every course costs the same on paper and what individuals actually pay is not likely to relate to the price at all, not to mention the intentional levering of mirage competition by convoluted policy fiddling. Most striking of all is the emergence of a kind of “soft binary

³ One colleague has pointed out that in 1963 the government of the day accepted the Robbins recommendations on the day of publication. But Robbins was a comprehensive and multifaceted review underpinned by a mass of evidence, which on publication met with a widely supportive consensus, and Browne was the diametric opposite on all counts. The post-Robbins policy response may have been in some respects *immediate*, but surely it's not reasonable to say *hasty* – whereas almost anyone who was around in late 2010 would say the post-Browne government response was *hasty*, if nothing else.

divide” between institutions that have been allowed to expand their student recruitment at full price, and others that have been forced to bid for student places at forced-down prices. This is an echo of the Robbins era with a contemporary twist, and one that has not been welcome or successful.

So what *do* we need?

Perhaps we are in need of a little bit of short-term pragmatism. Instead of whole system revolutions, we need to just work a bit at solving some of the problems that we have had for a long time, as well as some of the all-new problems that have been created in the last few years. These problems are not hard to see, and they really matter to students in higher education right now. In fact they are easy to see *because* they really matter to students right now. They are asking things like:

- Why can't I get a loan to help me retrain or return to education?
- Why doesn't my loan cover even my basic living expenses?
- Why do my fees pay for other students' fee waivers, when they can get a student loan just like I have?
- Why can the government retrospectively change what I'll pay back? Isn't that a bit unfair?
- If I complain, why will it take months for my complaint to be dealt with? And if my complaint is upheld by the statutory adjudicator, why does the university not have to abide by that ruling?

- Why do I get so little time with my teachers?
- Why have I only been set two assignments this term?
- Why doesn't the online learning support work properly, link up with other systems, or contain useful and imaginative content beyond a few typed-up lecture notes?
- Why do I have to hand in my essay between the hours of 2pm and 4pm on a specific Friday, even though I'm a part-time student and I work a 40-hour week?
- And why am I still waiting for feedback, four months later?

In autumn 2013, the Office of Fair Trading announced a broad-based initial investigation of higher education. This comes following publication of a significant report on sector regulation published by an independent Higher Education Commission, and the creation in recent years of a large amount of new sector regulatory machinery – chiefly a “Regulatory Partnership Group” under the auspices of HEFCE and the Student Loans Company, involving all the principal sector agencies. Some people here will think this is all a great shame, and others will think it is long overdue. I think it might be both. The questions framed above demand to be answered, and there are a lot more where they came from.

There are real, practical challenges to be tackled. Long-term radicalism is fine, and we are living with the outcomes of some truly great radicalism today. But short-term pragmatism is needed now. We would do well to ask what is actually worrying students and how those concerns can be addressed.

In place of an argument about state and market, we would place a higher premium on evaluating and responding to student needs. That may require a new and dynamic form of corporatism, underpinned by free thinking and involving students, teachers, managers and governors – not the ivory tower, but something rooted in an open partnership – both to reshape institutional policies and practices, and also to influence change in the sector at large.

That would be difficult and take time, but in the end, if done seriously, it might succeed where grand new systems based on state intervention or imposed markets surely will not.

CONCLUSION: THE ROBBINS REPORT AND BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION PAST AND FUTURE

Craig Calhoun

In October 1963, Her Majesty's Stationery Office published a remarkable document entitled simply, *Higher Education*. It was, as a subtitle continued, the *Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins*. Publication marked its presentation to Parliament and perhaps the single most pivotal point in an extraordinary era of advancement, transformation, and expansion of British higher education. It is fitting that LSE marked the anniversary with a conference at once academic and public. This book reports highlights from that event.

The anniversary event was fitting because of the major influence of the Robbins Report, because the Report stands as a symbol of an era of extraordinary change, and because LSE was the home institution of Lionel Robbins and the base for the work preparing the report.¹ This volume includes contributions from Lord Claus Moser and Lord Richard Layard, both now LSE

¹ The LSE Library marked the occasion by preparing an online digital exhibition entitled *Lionel Robbins – The economist and the world*, see <http://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/lionelrobbins>

professors emeriti after long and distinguished service and in 1961-63 the chief researcher and chief research assistant on Lord Robbins' extraordinary project. The result was not a typical parliamentary report. Lionel Robbins made it a model of social science analysis informing public policy. The main report was a book of 335 pages, but it came supported by six further volumes of statistics, interviews, submissions and analysis. Robbins was emphatically the leader and primary author, but the report developed from the deliberations of a committee full of distinguished members – deliberations shaped not only by the prior views of its members but by all the statistics, interviews, and comparative analyses Robbins insisted on assembling. The Robbins Report was an extraordinary research effort to support evidence-based policy. Though there have been other significant inquiries, higher education policy has often lacked such an evidentiary basis.

Not every recommendation of the Robbins Report was adopted. Indeed, remarkably many of the issues it raised remain central to higher education debates today. Robbins took up the value of higher education as an investment and the relative roles of fees and government support. He took up the structure of governing bodies, the balance between teaching and research (with an emphasis on the centrality of teaching and the need for improved methods), the place of business and management studies, the value of study in modern languages, the need for flexibility in curricula, the importance of postgraduate study for UK students, and the danger of university selection processes that use excessively narrow criteria and push secondary schools to narrow their own curricula. Still, the Robbins Report became the basis for a dramatic expansion of UK higher education. It takes an effort of thought today to recall how dramatic the ensuing transformation was.

The depth and breadth of the Robbins Report hearkened back to some of the Victorian and Edwardian parliamentary inquiries into social issues facing the country, including Beatrice Webb's remarkable Minority Report to the 1905-1909 Poor Law Commission.² It deployed modern social science in a new way, however, informed in no small part by work at the institution the Webbs had helped to found. Unfortunately, it offered a standard of such work that has seldom been matched, partly because parliamentary reports have become more political and less research-based documents. Lionel Robbins embodied the spirit of social science informing public administration that was at the heart of the Webbs' vision for LSE. He was a role model to a range of people at the School – students and staff – who give to the public in a variety of ways, including through their core duties at the university.

Expansion and opportunity

History has tended to see expansion as the major accomplishment of the Robbins Report and the dominant theme in the era. But it was certainly not the whole story. Transformation and advancement were also important. And expansion was not a matter simply of more of the same.

Higher education was transformed as well as enlarged with the addition of new subjects, the adoption of new approaches to teaching, and changes in the structure of degrees on offer. The Robbins Report encouraged thinking of higher education as a national *system*, one that incorporated a diverse range of institutions into a common – and ambitious – effort to create

² Beatrice Webb was a member of the Commission and headed up the preparation of the Minority Report, though Sidney Webb also contributed and it was published under their joint editorship as Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1909) *The Break-up of the Poor Law*, London: Longmans, Green and Co.



Student in main entrance to Old Building 1964

new knowledge and make knowledge effective for economic opportunities and growth. We should not lose sight of the many ways in which this marked advancement. A high quality but slightly sleepy system became more dynamic. An elitist system became more inclusive (though as we know class bias was not eliminated). Women and minorities entered higher education in growing numbers (though the system was quicker to accept them as students and moved only

slowly and incompletely to incorporate them into the higher academic ranks and university leadership).

While the Report did encourage expansion, this process had started before it was issued. The University of Sussex had been founded in 1961, the year the Robbins Committee started its work. Keele University launched in 1962 and the Universities of York and East Anglia had each been founded by the time the Robbins Report was submitted. In many ways, the parliamentary inquiry was a response to changes under way, and these were reflections not of central decision so much as of broad societal forces. The expansion of higher education responded to business demand for graduates, the baby boom, technological change, and growing prosperity. As the Robbins Report itself emphasised, expansion was characteristic not just of the UK but widespread among other modern countries with growing economies.

In Robbins' view, higher education was clearly a good, one that would benefit society if available in greater quantity. The Report laid out a number of purposes for higher education, functions it served. Higher education would advance the economy by increasing the skills of the labour force. It would promote general powers of the mind. Through research it would increase the overall store of knowledge. And not least, higher education would transmit "a common culture and common standards of citizenship."³ Building on these bases, the Robbins Report took as its basic premise – Robbins called it an "axiom" – that "courses of higher education should be available for all those

³ Lionel Robbins (1963) *Higher Education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*. Cmnd 2154, p 7. London: HMSO.

who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so".⁴ This was complemented by a core theme of the Report's empirical research: demonstrating that a much larger proportion of the population did in fact have the ability to succeed in higher education than the existing universities could accommodate. This meant that a shortage of university places was a bottleneck limiting potential achievement and that expansion need not compromise quality. Other arguments were in a sense subsidiary. These two points were enough to justify expansion.

It is significant that the pursuit of social mobility was not in itself one of Robbins' reasons to seek expansion. He was clear that increasing the supply and distribution of higher education would likely bring mobility. "The very fact that there will be more persons available with types of training that have been relatively scarce in the past may indeed imply changes in the relative income structure."⁵ And he held that schools and universities might do something to overcome inequalities in the access to knowledge and culture that families could provide. But changing the relative income structure was less the point than a likely by-product. Robbins argued from the principle of equality of opportunity not outcome. Of course others did see expansion of universities as a means to social mobility. And many of them have been disappointed. The growth of universities has not produced a more egalitarian society. And perhaps this should not surprise us. Expansion of higher education responded to the growth of middle and professional classes that was already underway. These wanted

⁴ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 8.

⁵ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 73.

more educational opportunities for their children, and the Robbins-era expansion of universities mainly created more places for them, not for children of the working class or poor.

The expansion was not simply a matter of new institutions, but of growth in the entire system. The number of students obtaining first degrees annually had expanded from 4,357 in 1920 to 22,426 in 1960. It then leapt to 51,189 by 1970.⁶ Some growth came with the conversion of ten Colleges of Advanced Technology to universities: Aston, Brunel, Cardiff and others. The CAT designation itself had only been introduced in 1956, though many of the institutions were older. Not surprisingly, expansion was accompanied by growing complexity. And it brought attendant increases in cost and regulation, not just of size and access.

A significant part of the 1960s expansion in higher education came through the development of polytechnics. These were distinct from universities in their mix of subjects – they had more technical courses and more directly related to fields of employment. This arguably made them more attractive to students who were the first generation in their families to seek higher qualifications – and allowed them to provide great added value to students whose higher education goals were largely defined by employment markets. As importantly, the polytechnics were mostly created and funded by local authorities. They were brought under central government control in 1988 under Margaret Thatcher – as part of what has been criticised as Tory nationalisation.⁷ When the polytechnics

⁶ Paul Bolton 'Education: historical statistics', House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/SG/4252, updated 27 November 2012.

were restructured as universities under the 1992 Higher Education Act (implemented in 1994), the relabelling did increase the number of working class students in universities. Indeed it tripled the total university population.⁸ This did not eliminate inequality, however; it incorporated it into the university system. What had been a distinction between universities and non-universities was increasingly turned into a hierarchy of universities. As inequality of income increased, inequality in higher education tracked it. Incorporation into the unitary national system also reduced the extent to which the new universities responded to local economic and social conditions or aspirations – something that had been a strength of the previous polytechnics. This was part of a general pattern of centralisation of authority in Westminster and a reduced role for municipal government and local coalitions joining business and public authorities. In the unified system, a competitive admissions process reinforced by inequality of previous schooling concentrated students of less privileged backgrounds in the former polytechnics.

Perhaps the single greatest transformation in participation was produced by the creation of the Open University, which enrolled its first students in 1971. This was not specifically envisioned in the Robbins Report, though it benefited from many of the arguments made by Robbins, including crucially that there was a great deal of talent in the UK being neglected by the existing higher education system. The OU was, rather,

7 Simon Jenkins (1995) *Accountable to None: the Tory nationalisation of Britain*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

8 In 1990, 77,163 students obtained university first degrees, 243,246 did in 2000. Paul Bolton, 'Education: historical statistics', House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/SG/4252, updated 27 November 2012.

a product of Labour Party interest specifically in creating opportunities for workers. More generally, many changes that accompanied expansion of UK higher education were not envisioned by the Robbins Report and some were directly contrary to it. Notably, though Robbins did call for a more integrated national system, it was really the combined effect of 1988 and 1992 legislation that created the unitary, centralised, hierarchical British system of universities. Robbins argued that universities should have a great deal of autonomy, an arrangement he said was “necessary if the connexion of the State with creative activities is to be a quickening rather than a deadening influence”.⁹

The later development of a single national hierarchy backed by centralised funding has been a powerful influence against other forms of differentiation besides hierarchies of selectivity, research production, and funding. Differentiation by mission, or in terms of engagement with different localities has actually been reduced.

As the university system expanded, individual institutions also grew. The Robbins Report indicated that British universities (exclusive of the federal University of London) numbered between 1 and 9,000. The average academic department had seven members of its teaching staff. Robbins thought both figures too small to be efficient. Several universities doubled in size in the 1960s and 1970s and more growth followed. Robbins noted universities of 30,000 abroad but thought that was too large to recommend. In the event some 20 British universities have passed that number. The growth of universities

⁹ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 251.

was controlled by a system of central planning; individual universities were required to apply for additional places. At first this was a dimension of the government's allocation of financial resources, but as in many other areas of UK higher education, regulation and regulatory institutions have carried on even as government funding has declined or ended. Still, the 2004 Higher Education Act gave universities a great deal more independence.

This brought a transformation in the experience of academics as well as students. As individual institutions grew larger, they also grew more complex. Universities faced both new administrative challenges internally and new external demands, leading to increased numbers of non-academic professionals and full-time administrators. This trend may have accelerated with later changes in funding and governance. For many academics it is part of growing "managerialism", often seen less as the result of expansion and organisational worry than as a simple managerial assertion.

Finance

The Robbins Report contained extensive discussion of the financing of higher education and clear recognition that expansion would entail costs. It argued that it was appropriate for government to be the major funder:

"The costs of the plan we have put forward are considerable. They involve an increase in the percentage of the national income devoted to higher education. They may involve increases of taxation, though whether this will be so depends upon the extent of other commitments, upon financial policy in general and upon

the increase of productivity. But we are convinced that no economic consideration need hinder their adoption if we as a nation desire the educational changes they will make possible. Whether we have them or not is a question of choice. It is not a question of any technical or economic inability to achieve them.”¹⁰

The benefits of higher education, Robbins argued, would be public as well as private.

The committee considered at some length the possibility of using loans rather than subsidies – both loans to institutions and loans to students for the payment of their fees. Robbins concluded, however, that relying on loans rather than grants would not greatly increase the funds available for higher education and would add significantly to administrative costs. One point the Report emphasised strongly was that it was valuable to have multiple streams of funding – even for government funds, but also recognising the importance of gifts and donations. Funding included both local authority grants to students and direct grants to universities.

As government increased its funding for higher education, and worked to develop the national system Robbins advocated, it brought greater centralisation. In general, British universities are not directly governmental institutions. They are “public” in the sense of receiving some level of state funding and often in the missions they adopt. But with state funding came efforts at state control. Balancing this with academic autonomy remained a challenge (as indeed Robbins anticipated). The 1988 Higher

¹⁰ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 216.

Education Act recognised most universities as independent corporations operating with charitable status, but integrated them into a single national governance and funding system.

The post-Robbins commitment of expanded government funding was impressive. The advance reflected acceptance of Robbins' arguments not only about economic benefits to higher education but also its importance in itself and for a democratic society. An important point made by Nick Barr during this conference is that while higher education had long been important culturally in Britain, 50 years ago it was much less important economically. Higher education has become much more integrated into overall economic performance, and central to individuals' careers and career expectations. Demand for higher education has grown as part of a broader change in society itself and in structures of employment.

The increased funding that followed the Robbins Report came initially in an era of widespread economic growth. This post-war economic growth, moreover, came in forms that broadly reduced inequality within the UK. Manufacturing wages and white-collar jobs grew side-by-side. And higher education was only one of many public goods that the British state attempted to nurture and distribute more widely. It grew alongside the NHS, schools, roads and housing. But by the 1970s both the economy and attitudes toward government spending were changing.

Higher education largely escaped the first wave of British privatisations, but even though the system remains closely tied to the state, successive governments have reduced funding. One reason is simply that the different major lines

of government spending that drew together in the post-war boom came into greater competition with each other as costs kept going up after the economy changed. The costs of schooling at other levels, health care, and infrastructural investments challenge calls for greater support to universities – as indeed they have led to cuts in the Ministry of Defence and elsewhere. Governments have also changed the ways in which funding is allocated. Block grants have been reduced and with them university autonomy in resource allocation. Various kinds of competition have been introduced, including formalised research assessment (RAE and then REF) as a way of distributing research funds. And crucially student fees became more central. Relying on fees rather than grants is based partly on the belief that students ought to pay because they are the primary beneficiaries of higher education. This is contrary to the strong argument in the Robbins Report that the social value of higher education should be recognised with government funding. This argument has not lost all its weight, of course, but arguably social benefits are undervalued in a fee-based system.

Universities have found a variety of sources of funding from summer schools and renting facilities, but perhaps above all recruiting foreign students paying higher fees. The proliferation of different funding bases is matched by new attention to differences in costs for different activities, including different kinds of teaching. There are too many issues with this to take up in detail. One point is the question of whether research funding to universities pays for the full costs of research. External funding is valuable for a variety of reasons, including sometimes defraying costs that universities would bear anyway. But the pursuit of it can also impose costs on universities that

the external funding does not cover. Another issue, mentioned above, is considerable ambiguity about how to apportion costs between teaching and research. When it is said, for example, that STEM fields are high-cost to teach, to what extent should this reflect costs of research facilities and faculty time made expensive by substantial allocations to research activities? There is also debate about which subjects are subsidising others – or presenting a disproportionate draw on resources. Applied sciences are often praised for bringing resources to universities through grants and corporate partnerships; the implication is that the resources are shared through cross-subsidies. Humanists might retort that their fields would be more expensive to teach if they had better facilities, were paid more, were allowed to organise teaching in small classes, and had lower numbers of contact hours with students. These are not questions easily settled without better research on the matter than exists today.

Research and teaching

There are several reasons for rising costs of higher education. Increased student numbers is only one. Unit costs also increased, for reasons ranging from the cost of growing government regulation to expectations for improved facilities to increasing costs of research. The government itself increased research funding, but competition among universities for research standing led to more and more allocation of academic time and facilities to research – in excess of what research grants paid. Universities compete with each other for research funding, and as with centralised research assessment exercises this becomes not only a reinforcement of hierarchy but also an incentive to prioritise research over teaching.¹¹

Robbins was a strong advocate for academic research – and himself a strong producer of it. He argued both that university-based research was important for various immediately practical purposes such as advancing the national economy, curing diseases and addressing social issues and that it was important for universities to maintain a commitment to knowledge as such, both creating new knowledge without immediate application and retaining knowledge from the past through scholarship. Still, Robbins was also concerned that universities be committed centrally to the value of teaching.

Already in the early 1960s, some were arguing that emphasis on publication of research findings was looming too large in university values. In the Robbins Report's words: "We think the extent to which a narrow criterion of academic excellence has invaded British universities is sometimes overstated. But we are convinced that the danger exists."¹² Robbins urged that teaching should get at least as much emphasis as research, if not more. For all the wonderful teachers working in British universities, this is advice that has not been followed. If teaching was at the centre of many of the innovations of the 1960s, at least since the 1980s research has been in the ascendancy, not least because it was the object of recurrent formalised and increasingly elaborate assessment exercises and these were used to distribute funds. There is no essential reason why strengthening research should undermine teaching and the quality of learning, but pressures to increase the labour and productivity of academics hours confront limitations on the hours in each day.

11 This is not just a UK issue, but much more widespread. See Diana Rhoten and Craig Calhoun (eds) (2011) *Knowledge Matters: the public mission of the research university*, New York: Columbia University Press.

12 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 184

Robbins worried that universities needed to be more clearly appreciative of teaching excellence, and Robbins in his own career demonstrated how much he valued it. The Report called for abolishing the salary distinction between senior lecturer and reader, while making clear that research distinction was required only for promotion to the latter and teaching excellence was sufficient for the former. While the Report argued against idealising and attempting to generalise the old Oxbridge notion of purely individual tuition, it did emphasise that personal work with teachers was a necessary complement to lectures and reading or writing. Every student should have a tutor or supervisor, Robbins argued, and this should not be allowed to degenerate into a mere formality.¹³ It is worth noting that in the LSE Economics Department of Robbins' day, world-famous economists provided such individual supervision to undergraduates – including Robbins himself.

The Robbins Report was clear that good teaching came in different styles and modalities. Not everyone was a great lecturer, but lectures could be extremely valuable. Not everyone was at his or her best on a personal level. Still, Robbins worried about the preponderance of lectures over small group or personal instruction. A chart in the Robbins Report examines how much teaching is organised in student groups of one to four, five to nine, or over ten. Evidently Robbins thought that no sensible university administrator would imagine that non-lecture teaching could take place in groups much larger than ten.¹⁴

13 L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 188.

Robbins argued that combining research and teaching in the same institution was good for both. "There is no borderline between teaching and research; they are complementary and overlapping activities."¹⁵ This is partly the case because students need to be part of a culture of enquiry, not simply passive recipients of teaching. Robbins thought the presence of research-oriented postgraduate students would be good for undergraduates (and indeed that it would be good for them to play a role in undergraduate teaching). He did not envision the growth in entirely taught, non-research postgraduate courses that in fact developed over the last 50 years.

Indeed, it was observed several times in this conference marking 50 years since the Robbins Report that one of the developments that would be most likely to worry Robbins himself could he see UK higher education now was loss of balance between research and teaching. In the words of the Report: "A publicly subsidised institution intended to perform all the functions of a university that suddenly decided to devote the greater part of its resources to research, to the almost total neglect of teaching, would doubtless be something of a scandal."¹⁶ A big issue before us now is how to put learning clearly at the centre of academic life.

But of course "learning" is a word linked to research as well as to teaching. This is a key reason why Robbins saw the two as rightly linked, not separated. Intellectual engagement, a spirit of curiosity and critical inquiry join together the scholarly desire to understand what is known, to share knowledge through

14 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 186.

15 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 182.

16 L Robbins (1963), op cit, p 232.

teaching, and to create new knowledge through research. Universities, as the Robbins report described them, always and necessarily exceeded instrumental purposes. Universities were good for producing economic benefits, skilled workers, new technologies, and medical treatments. But the animating purposes that distinguished higher education and made universities as productive as they were could never be solely instrumental and certainly not solely short term. This is why, according to the Robbins Report, “it is the essence of higher education that it introduces students to a world of intellectual responsibility and intellectual discovery in which they are to play their part”.¹⁷

But as we look back on the 50 years since the Robbins Report, pressures for instrumental performance loom large and they have shaped British universities profoundly. This is not just a matter of government policy or funding regimes. It is equally a matter of student demand for courses closely tailored to job markets, demand that has increased in an era of intensified inequality, difficult job markets, and celebration of both business and technology. It is in the spirit of Robbins to ask whether this has narrowed our evaluations of the purposes of higher education.

There is no escaping from the idea that universities have instrumental purposes. This is the point that Robbins made with his passing mention early in the report that “Confucius said in the Analects that it was not easy to find a man who had studied for three years without aiming at pay”.¹⁸ Of course

¹⁷ L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 181.

people go to universities expecting to be able to get jobs. Indeed, people who are first generation university graduates may have all the more reason to be focused on what kind of job they are going to get after graduation, lacking the benefit of family, money, and other resources to make their way in the world. So instrumental pay-off may be especially important when universities seek to facilitate social mobility. But of course the Robbins Report goes immediately on to stress the importance of promoting the “general powers of the mind”. “The aim should be to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women.”¹⁹ Even where universities aim to impart specialised practical techniques, they should aim to embed this in broader education, enabling graduates to address a variety of different tasks and problems, not be narrowly bound to those foreseen in planning a course. And of course, as noted above, the Robbins Report also goes on to stress the advancement of learning and the search for truth, the transmission of a common culture, and common capacities for citizenship. Reducing university education to its instrumental purposes would, the Robbins Report suggests, undermine even its capacity to contribute practical benefits. Moreover, such instrumentalisation would do great damage to some parts of higher education at which Britain has been wonderful for a long time. Open-ended inquiry has been vital to Britain’s distinctive contributions to learning. And here I do not mean only research, but also learning by students whose studies are rightly described as enquiries or explorations. Neither the relations between teaching and research nor those between open-ended enquiry and practical objectives should ever be treated as “either/or” matters.

18 L Robbins (1963), *op cit*, p 6.

19 *Ibid.*

As Stefan Collini pointed out during the conference, excessive instrumentalisation is encouraged by efforts to make objective indicators the only way of evaluating anything. We also need qualitative knowledge.²⁰ Attempts to bypass reliance on judgment in favour of more mechanistic application of decision-rules to seemingly objective indicators are dangerous. Judgment is one of the crucial human faculties advanced by universities. To be sure judgment needs to be informed by knowledge and evidence, and indeed it is required to determine when purported knowledge is sound and what knowledge counts as legitimate evidence. We need to cultivate the capacity for judgment. And we need to use informed judgment in academic decisions on issues from admissions through research and teaching performance to the evaluation of budgets. Undervaluing qualitative judgment is a problem not just for the operation of universities or indeed governments, but also for democracy. If we don't exercise judgment we forfeit the potential democratically to guide institutions that we care about.

The combination of data, analysis, and judgment is at the heart of the approach to policy exemplified by the Robbins Report. This doesn't mean it was right about everything or prescient on every issue. One of the reasons informed judgment is so important is that data and analysis are always incomplete, especially on the most complex questions and in the midst of continuing change.

There are many, many questions before universities and policymakers today that demand data, analysis and judgment. On some the Robbins Report still offers guidance. What, for

²⁰ See also S Collini (2012) *What Are Universities For?*, Penguin.

example, is our concept of public benefit? Too often discussions of the cost of higher education and who should pay emphasise only the private benefits to individual students. Speaking at the conference, David Willetts rightly made it clear that there are both individual and societal benefits. But the idea of “public” means more than merely collective. Surely universities have an important role in animating public discussions, animating the idea of the public good, and ensuring that the collective has the potential also to be the democratic?

Or again, how should we evaluate the basic issue of reproduction versus mobility? To what extent do we want universities to reproduce the existing organisation of society, including its class divisions? To what extent do we want universities that are able to change that organisation – and in what ways? It should chasten us that of the 50 years since the Robbins Report, about 38 have been years of intensifying inequality. But some patterns of inequality have been reduced; gender is a notable example and higher education has played an important role. The question of reproduction concerns not only structures of inequality but also social structures in general. Is it part of the task of universities to improve understanding of major public issues so that public debates can be of higher quality and public policy better chosen and more effective? There are plenty of issues demanding both understanding and better public response, from climate change to whether the UK should stay in the European Union.

Some of the issues concern how well universities can perform their core educational, research, and public roles. What will it mean if UK higher education is more and more a matter of private, sometimes for-profit institutions? Should these

be eligible for government funding? Will they bring healthy diversity or an undermining competition? What about the role of international competition? How will UK universities meet challenges? And how much will competition for students, faculty, and money change them? Government policy pulls in different directions, regulating universities mainly as national institutions, urging them to seek international revenues and international leadership, but then putting up a variety of obstacles for international students such as an unhelpful visa regime. Or again, what about the future of academic publishing and calls to make this open access? Should open access be achieved through payments to private for-profit publishers (and highly commercialised not-for-profit ones)? Or should there be investment in a more fully public publishing alternative? What about the pursuit of intellectual property rights: is science distorted by efforts to gain profits from commercialising intellectual property? What about new technologies? How should universities use them? To supplement face-to-face instruction on their campuses? To reach students throughout the world with massive open online courses?

This is just a sample of the questions facing higher education today. Many of them are new, and demand new thinking. I am very grateful for a conference in which these and other questions were posed. I am even more grateful for the example the Robbins Report offers of an intellectual, serious effort to inform policy with data, analysis, and judgment. And I am grateful to be working in UK higher education as it continues to benefit from advancements brought by the Robbins Report and the public investments that followed it.



Lionel Robbins and Friedrich Hayek at the wedding of Laurence and Esca Hayek, July 1961

