Holmwood, John. "Introduction." *A Manifesto for the Public University*. Ed. John Holmwood. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 1–11. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666459.0005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:15 UTC.

Copyright © John Holmwood 2011. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Introduction

John Holmwood

The present volume has a very specific moment of gestation, namely the perception in the United Kingdom of a crisis in the idea of the public university associated with the publication of the Browne Report in October 2010 (Browne Report 2010).¹ In effect, the Report recommended a higher education system directed by market forces and the replacement of direct funding of undergraduate courses by student fees. Students would be supported by a system of publicly funded loans, but their fees would replace the direct funding of undergraduate courses through the ‘block grant’ (except for high priority, or high cost, courses in science, engineering and medicine, where some direct funding would remain).

The recommendations were enthusiastically accepted by the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, which had taken office in May 2010. It had formed an agreement to reduce dramatically the fiscal deficit caused by bailing out the financial sector following the financial crisis. It sought cuts to government spending across all departments (except health) in the region of 20–30 per cent. The removal of the ‘block grant’ and the shift in the cost of undergraduate education from the tax system to individual students via loans promised a reduction in spending on higher education of 80 per cent. Notwithstanding that the Liberal Democrats had opposed tuition fees as part of their election campaign, and that the Conservatives had made no mention of it in their campaign literature, the coalition pressed ahead with the proposals, albeit capping the upper level of fees at £9,000, and seeking mechanisms that would assure that such fees would not be typical and that a lower fee of £6,000 would stick in most cases.²

The proposals sent shock waves across higher education circles in the UK, including a very visible response from students in the form of demonstrations and campus occupations. University Vice-Chancellors, however, were muted in response. As Sir Steve Smith, President of the body representing universities, Universities UK, suggests in the afterword of this book, they were faced with the threat of very serious cuts to

funding – around 20 to 30 per cent – and the opportunity to replace that cut by student fees seemed like a lifeline that would enable universities to get through a potentially very serious financial crisis without too much damage.

For many students and prospective students, the primary issue was the breach of an electoral promise and the absence of a proper debate. There was also the related issue that the government justified the cutting of the fiscal deficit as a duty, which the present generation owed future generations, not to leave to them a legacy of debt. Yet, it seemed that the act of privatizing undergraduate education involved just that, bequeathing high levels of indebtedness to future generations of students in a decision made by politicians who were nearly all beneficiaries of publicly funded higher education.

Moreover, it quite quickly became apparent that the costs of the new system of student loans would be similar to the savings made by cutting the block grant. The only difference was that, by an ‘accounting device’, the cost would appear to be ‘off the books’. Indeed, in making this assessment, the independent Higher Education Policy Institute concluded that, ‘the idea of the withdrawal of the state from the direct funding of universities is deeply ideological’ (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2010: paragraph 52), and was specifically designed to introduce a market in higher education.

This book is written in direct response to the threat to the public benefits of higher education that will potentially follow from the introduction of the market.³ One of the primary public goods afforded by universities is that of providing means of public debate. For that reason, an afterword by Sir Steve Smith is included. He suggests that the risks are not as severe as those claimed by the other authors in this volume and, more importantly, not as severe as the risks that would have followed from swingeing cuts to public funding with no alternative source of funding being made available. In the rest of this introduction, I shall set out some elements of the counter-argument, while recognizing that Sir Steve Smith’s position has some merit and, potentially, has some support across the sector from academics at institutions likely to be beneficiaries. Nonetheless, the stakes are high.

At the outset, let me concede that although the idea of a public university is strongly associated with that of a publicly funded university, it would be difficult to claim that the association is a necessary one. The authors in this book define the public university in terms of its public

benefits and, more specifically, how it functions for the public or publics, not directly by how it is funded, though all of us believe public funding to be justified. Nor is it the case that the only functions of a university are public functions. In Chapter 2, I will set out the development of the idea of the ‘multiversity’ (Kerr 2001 [1963]) and the place of the public functions of the university within it. I will also set out how the standard view of the ‘public’ makes the government its representative and the protector of its interests as taxpayer. In contrast, I shall use the pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, to argue that the public is properly regarded as *representing itself*, with the university facilitating that representation through the encouragement of debate and common resources of knowledge.

Where the functions of the university are understood as multiple, this poses the issue of how their relations should be conceived, especially in the context of private interests in the commodification of knowledge and globalization of the economy and higher education. In Chapter 2, Michael Burawoy sets out different dimensions of the university and its audiences and how the marketization of higher education threatens the wider public good that the university can serve. The multiversity risks becoming a monoversity serving only private purposes, with its public functions atrophying.

While there is considerable overlap between the two ideas – public universities and public funding – universities necessarily also receive income from private sources and serve private benefits. Moreover, given the history of many universities as institutions founded by private endowments, it is difficult to suggest that their public benefits can only be secured by public funding. Historically, however, private universities have usually been charitable institutions organized on a ‘not-for-profit’ basis.

For the most part, there has been a broad political consensus on the value of public higher education. This has been evident for the past fifty or sixty years across countries that are otherwise very different in their public policy regimes. Indeed, most have recognized first secondary education, and then higher education, as social rights necessary to the achievement of other liberal rights, such as employment based on meritocratic achievement, and political participation.

What is distinctive at the present time, however, is the breakdown of this political consensus and the development of the idea that education is not something external to the market, upon which the latter’s fair

and proper functioning might depend, but something that may itself be subject to the market. Thus, the last decades have witnessed the emergence of ‘for-profit’ providers of higher education, in the form of transnational corporations (such as Apollo Group, Kaplan and Pearson International). These latter providers are not directed toward the public good, but shareholder value and executive packages, derived from offering a cheaper product that has ‘stripped out’ the public functions of higher education (except in so far as it is compatible with maximizing private returns). Indeed, it is precisely in order to facilitate competition by for-profit providers that the ‘block grant’ has been removed (McGettigan 2010).

In so far as other universities are required to compete on the same terms as for-profit providers, or find an ‘added value’ that can be sold to students as the source of a future private benefit, then the wider public benefits of higher education are at serious risk. The issue is not so much retaining (or increasing) current levels of funding for higher education – it is true that this can be done by student fees *or* by public funding – but the nature of the purposes of higher education and the consequences of allowing those purposes to be defined by the market.

The reforms to higher education that are currently taking place in England are not only about teaching, but also about research with the government pressing funding bodies – the Higher Education Funding Councils, and also the Research Councils – to emphasize concentration and selectivity in their distribution of funds, as well as to ensure increased impact of research for private users and other beneficiaries.

As Philip Moriarty (Chapter 4) indicates, the public funding of science is increasingly directed away from ‘blue skies’ research toward research that can show a direct benefit to a private beneficiary. According to Moriarty, this challenges the ‘norms’ intrinsic to the organization of science and to the maintenance of public trust. At the same time, most of the evidence about guiding science toward short-term economic gains suggests that it is a policy that will not deliver the outcomes that are sought. Paradoxically, the increased emphasis on the marketization of public research and development derives, in part, from market failure in private research and development.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that for all the emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy’, governments are more interested in ‘policy-based evidence’. This is traced by Desmond King in Chapter 5, where he sets the history of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

and government pressures upon it. Whereas the provision of policy-relevant knowledge is widely recognized as one of the public functions of the university and one of the reasons for the public funding of research in the social sciences, what has been most difficult is the accommodation of this function to the changing political context of universities.

As King argues, while there was wide political acceptance that social scientific knowledge had an important function in public policy, only tentative steps were made to the institutionalizing of the idea that this knowledge might also serve critical purposes and be the means by which publics might hold governments to account. That governments seek to steer the development of social scientific research toward preferred ends is one seeming constant in the history of the ESRC. However, the shift to neo-liberal modes of governance of research seems to have extinguished any idea of social scientific knowledge facilitating public debate and criticism. In so far as universities adapt to the external context of research funding, this restriction becomes general across the sector.

The present book is a manifesto for the public university. However, a manifesto usually has an orientation to the future, setting out the changes that it wishes to bring into being. This manifesto also invokes the past, calling for changes to the current direction of higher education, in the name of well-established values that are being hollowed out by the market, notwithstanding government claims to promote a 'Big Society'. In doing so, we propose that the crisis of the public university is also a crisis of public life.

In part, this crisis in public life is indicated by the fact that the proposals for radical change in the organization of higher education in England had not been discussed prior to the election. The Browne Report itself was presented as the very substance of the debate, as the proposals on fees were 'whipped' through Parliament. Yet, as Baroness Tessa Blackstone, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Greenwich, commented in the short debate in the House of Lords:

No-one could have predicted that such a review would double the fees then proposed and assume that the public funding of 80 per cent of undergraduate tuition would be abandoned. Nor would anyone have predicted that this review would be based on a commitment to the free market that is so extreme that it abandons, to quote Sir Peter Scott, a much respected vice-chancellor and former member of the HEFCE board, 'the very idea of a public system of higher education, built with such care and effort since Robbins'. (2010)

Reference to the Report of the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (1963) is apposite. The reforms challenge the principles established by that Committee, which have guided the development of UK higher education since that date. In effect, it recommended the expansion of higher education and its integration with the secondary school system. The Education Act of 1944 had extended the right of publicly funded secondary education to all and the Robbins Committee extended that right to higher education. This was enshrined in the axiom that, ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Robbins Report 1963: para. 31).

The Committee also recognized that the expansion of higher education served important economic ends (the Committee did not use the term ‘knowledge economy’, but it did recognize the increasing importance of the knowledge base to economic growth), as did the later Dearing Report of 1997, with its theme of the ‘knowledge society’. In making these arguments, the Robbins Report was of the view that higher education had grown in an ad hoc way and in a variety of institutions (universities, colleges of education, colleges of advanced technology and colleges of further education), and was pursued by a variety of routes (full-time, part-time and sandwich courses). The Committee proposed to approach higher education as a *system* and recommended that there should be a diversity of institutions, with different characteristics, but that they should all be properly supported and allowed to flourish.

In part, the Robbins Committee was confronting the status hierarchy evident in a secondary school system divided in terms of public and private schools. These status differences were also to be found among universities, especially the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, with their longstanding connections to the system of private secondary education. However, the expansion of higher education would mitigate these status differences by widening access and integrating public secondary education with a system of public higher education. While status differences among higher education institutions were likely to continue, for the Robbins Committee the purpose of the new system was to mitigate those differences. Yet, as Diane Reay argues (Chapter 7), these status differences have remained and the new system of funding is likely to reinforce them, with the intention to generate ‘selective’ institutions able to charge higher fees than less ‘selective’ institutions. Indeed, with the recommendation of a stratified system of selective universities each

differently resourced, the idea of education shifts from being a ‘public good’ to a ‘positional good’, one enjoyed to the extent that it confers an exclusive advantage. In this way, selection is also social, and the consequence is to reinforce the social exclusivity of institutions and the social distance between different groups.

The immediate context of the Robbins Report was a perception that the UK lagged behind other countries – especially the United States and Western Europe – in terms of the proportion of the age cohort attending university. This was argued to be potentially damaging to UK economic performance in the context of increasing demand for a highly educated workforce. However, this was by no means the only justification put forward by Robbins. Education was seen as a public good in its own terms, valuable both for the student and the wider society. University education, according to Robbins, served to cultivate the mind, and was concerned with the development and transmission of knowledge and culture, as well as serving democratic citizenship by improving debate and the capacities of citizens (Robbins Report 1963: paras 25–8).

The Robbins Committee also argued that education should take place in an environment in which research (or scholarship) and teaching occur alongside each other. This would inculcate in students standards of criticism and rigour by example, but it was also right, Robbins argued, that universities should meet the aspirations of those who work in them to apply themselves to scholarship, research and the development of knowledge. It is precisely these broad concerns that are absent in the Browne Report and in government plans for the opening-up of the sector to for-profit providers, which are to be granted the title of university without having the functions or characteristics of a university in terms of research or teaching staff who have themselves participated in the development of the knowledge they seek to transmit. Nor, it must be said, have university vice-chancellors distinguished themselves by arguing vigorously for the very functions of the university and its modes of instruction that the Robbins Report defined as essential to education at degree level.

However, the simple expansion of the system, together with the increased emphasis on audit measures that have gone along with it, does indicate problems in the development of higher education, as Miller and Sabapathy discuss (Chapter 3). Students are rightly concerned with employment and have the expectation that going to university will help them secure the jobs to which they aspire. Nonetheless, university also

helps students discover and expand their idea of themselves and how they might realize themselves within particular employments or make a difference. However, a concern with the reproduction of academic subjects – something of direct interest to academics and reinforced by the Research Assessment Exercise – does not serve an expanded idea of education either. In other words, while the marketization of undergraduate courses and ‘student choice’ are a poor means for securing this enlarged idea of education, it is also incumbent upon academic staff to develop a curriculum suited to the needs of students. In other words, it is right that students be at the heart of higher education, but in a role other than as consumers.

The expansion of student numbers took place gradually. A modest increase after the construction of new universities and the incorporation of the old colleges of advanced technology, following Robbins, accelerated from about 15 per cent in the 1980s to the present figure of around 36 per cent of eighteen- to nineteen-year-olds (the figure is higher if account is taken of students who enter when they are older).⁴ This was accomplished, in part, by the incorporation of the polytechnics into the university system in 1992 (something intended by the Robbins Committee, but not initially accomplished due to opposition), but also by a general expansion of student numbers and increased exhortations to young people about the benefits of higher education (albeit usually couched in utilitarian terms).

It is not difficult to see that while the principle of publicly funded university education in the UK emerged in the 1960s as a prelude to the creation of a system of mass higher education, it seems to have been called into question by the further expansion of university education in the 1980s. This is a somewhat paradoxical development. The principle of publicly funded universal secondary education is not in doubt, despite its expansion. What seemed to give the members of the Browne Review some pause in seeing higher education in the same light is the qualification that lies in the Robbins’ axiom, namely that it is a right that is to be limited by ability and attainment. It is this limitation that makes education beyond any compulsory school leaving age less than universal.⁵ At the same time, it potentially reintroduces a possible new ‘status’ – perhaps, attainment is not equivalent and not all levels of attainment should be supported equally? In other words, the very mitigation of status differences among institutions of higher education promoted by the Robbins Committee has come to be challenged by the idea that higher education is properly

‘selective’, where more ‘selective’ institutions are deserving of greater support through the charging of higher fees (albeit the ultimate intention of higher fees is not that they should support better teaching, but other aspects of the ‘student experience’ and research).⁶

For Lord Browne and his colleagues, this further implied that there were benefits to higher education that accrued to individuals and that these were potentially different depending upon the institution attended and the subject studied. For Browne this also meant that any public funding of a degree programme was tantamount to a subsidy of a private benefit and potentially unjust. Yet this, too, was an argument addressed by the Robbins Committee, which allowed that it might warrant the student paying a contribution in the form of fees supported by loans. However, the Robbins Committee recommended against it on a number of grounds. First, it was argued that the calculation of future benefit is too uncertain, given likely changes in the labour market. Second, it maintained that there were significant public goods secured by university education and that, for these reasons, public funding is appropriate. Indeed, not to recognize this would be a different kind of injustice, where private individuals would be asked to secure a public benefit (Robbins Report 1963: para. 644).

If the Dearing Report (1997) answered the question a little differently, recommending ‘top up fees’, it did so with a similar general orientation to the problem as that of the Robbins Committee. The public benefits of higher education extended beyond those of private individuals. Public higher education is necessary to ‘sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones; [and to] be part of the conscience of a democratic society, founded on respect for the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of the individual to society as a whole’ (Dearing Report 1997: para. 5). For this reason, fees paid by students should only be a supplement to publicly funded higher education.⁷

One of the troubling features of the Browne Report is its unbalanced nature. While it raises the ‘injustice’ of a public subsidy for a private benefit, it does not address the issue of the private subsidy of public benefits. Indeed, the ‘philistine’ nature of the Report identified by Collini (2010), which he associates with the reduction of all value to economic utility, can be understood as a tactical and cynical device.⁸ The Report was expressly seeking to justify a market in higher education and the conversion of all public funding of arts, humanities and social science

subjects into funding by student fees supported by a system of loans. To have identified the public benefits of higher education would be to imply the very case for public funding, just as the Report was seeking to present the opposite conclusion.

But why might the public funding of higher education be thought unsustainable in a context where the economic significance of education is increasingly recognized (Sainsbury Report 2007)? The expansion of higher education after Robbins was linked to another specific expectation. This was the assumption of a secular decline in the range of inequalities associated with a general increase in pay at the bottom and a relative reduction in returns at the top (brought about, in part, by the expansion of higher education). Notwithstanding Lord Robbins' own reputation as a liberal economist committed to the market mechanism where appropriate, this understanding of a progressive decline in inequality was central to his own perception of the wider environment in which higher education was developing. Since the 1980s, however, the secular decline in inequality has been sharply reversed, associated with neo-liberal policies of deregulation applied throughout the economy, such that inequalities are now more sharply polarized than at any time since the early 1900s. As Stephen McKay and Karen Rowlingson argue (Chapter 6), this structure of inequality is the context in which universities now function and any question of their 'social mission' has to take into account the fact that universities are themselves part of the reproduction of inequality.

With the increase in inequalities, however, has also come a reduction in taxation on high earners and a concern to target benefits on those who are most in need. In the context of education, this includes the idea that the public subsidy of higher education is not only a subsidy of those who will go on to benefit, but also of those whose families have paid for their children's secondary education (frequently at fees well in excess of those currently proposed for universities, even at the premium level of £9,000). The fact that some can afford to pay for their children's education – and wish to do so to secure an advantage for them – is converted into a requirement that all should pay. As McKay and Rowlingson argue, higher education as a social right is thereby diminished and represented as a 'choice', where current and future indebtedness will be a major constraint on participation for those from less well-off backgrounds.

Moreover, the contribution that universities might make to economic growth is now associated with an economy that is allowed to be an engine

of inequality. It is this that motivates the introduction of the 'figure' of the manual worker who does not benefit from higher education, but is being asked to pay for it through taxation. Whereas the wider benefit was previously understood in terms of the general impact of education in reducing inequalities, and improving jobs, now it seems that the issue is one of social mobility within a system of widening inequalities. The issue has become how to secure greater participation in higher education of the 'manual worker's' children – through bursaries and support for children from poor backgrounds, for example – rather than the problem of poverty as such. However, the problem of poverty and inequality is precisely to make it difficult for those aspirations to be fulfilled, a situation that will be exacerbated by the new system of fees.

This is an attenuation of the social mission of the university and its contribution to citizenship, but it also has paradoxical consequences. Social mobility is more difficult precisely where inequality is greatest (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Where wide inequalities are tolerated, the emphasis is usually upon targeted (rather than universal) solutions to deal with specific problems, but these have unintended consequences that reinforce the problem of access. Education shifts from being a right of citizenship to a private investment in personal human capital and the transition from Robbins to Browne is complete. Whereas the success of the Robbins reforms was to 'universalize' the aspiration to higher education,⁹ the current government's response is now to privatize higher education and thereby to reduce the opportunities to fulfil those aspirations.

The public university matters to everyone, we contend, because it is a condition of citizenship and full participation in economic, cultural and political life. Whatever diminishes it, diminishes our life in common.