

COMMENTARY

What has the Coalition Government done for higher education?

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Higher education in England has changed between 2010 and 2015 to a greater extent than in any other comparable time period – and as a direct result of the policies of the Coalition Government formed in May 2010. The move to a mass higher education system in Britain, for example – from around 1m students to 2.5m – took around twenty-five years starting in the mid-1980s. But even this fundamental change in scale was arguably ‘more of the same’, with the main modalities of the higher education system remaining largely unaltered: the system in 2010 would have appeared largely familiar to a visitor from a 1980s university. As with most areas of public policy, continuities in higher education policy can be identified along with changes: so, the Labour Government introduced tuition fees in 1998, followed by a new loan-based fee regime in 2006. These developments clearly provided a framework within which the 2012 fee regime could fit: however, the earlier changes seem, in retrospect, to be fairly modest developments. When considering research policy, the concentration of publicly funded research into fewer and fewer institutions began with the 1986 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and carried on fairly steadily through the intervening years, though since 2010 the dominance of the London–Oxford–Cambridge ‘golden triangle’ has been confirmed with the implementation of the 2014 successor to the RAE, the Research Excellence Framework. In contrast to this historical pattern of stability or gradual change, during the 2010–15 period the English higher education landscape has changed profoundly, in a number of ways. But underlying these changes has been an ideology resting on faith in the beneficent results of market-based methods.

The basis for these changes is to be found in the 2011 White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS) 2011) – one of the Coalition Government’s early policy statements. The White Paper’s single most notable policy – certainly its most eye-catching one – was the introduction of a new ‘graduate contribution scheme’ with loans of up to £9,000 being available to meet tuition fees, and with a compensating reduction in the block grants for teaching paid to universities by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. (Different arrangements would apply to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.) These changes followed a review of university finance led by Lord Browne, established under the previous government, but did not precisely follow what Browne recommended (Browne, 2010). Most independent commentators consider that these arrangements, for a number of reasons, have not produced and will not produce significant savings for the public finances (though the uncertainties involved in making long-term estimates are large), although they do not seem to

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have had adverse effects on participation in higher education in England, either in terms of total student numbers or of students' social class (Higher Education Commission, 2014; Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), 2014).

The 2012 fee regime has in effect shifted the taxpayer subsidy made to English higher education from direct grants to universities to support for the loan system, but without producing significant savings – one of the aims set out in the White Paper. It has, however, generated substantial additional income for universities, which in many cases are able to charge tuition fees considerably in excess of the costs of teaching the students concerned. However, the block-grant funding mechanism, developed by the University Grants Committee in the immediate post-war years (though arguably dating back even longer) (Shattock, 2012: 109), and widely regarded as the bedrock of university funding in Britain because of the flexibility it provided to institutional managements, has been largely swept away in a major change to the landscape.

The other main theme of the White Paper was the introduction of more competition into the English higher education sector – even though the White Paper's foreword refers to the sector's 'world-class reputation', which might suggest that its competitors would be other world-leading higher education systems. On the contrary: the new student tuition fee regime itself was viewed as a competition-inducing measure, with 'well-informed students driving teaching excellence' (the chapter 2 title) and 'student choice driv[ing] competition, including on price' (BIS, 2011: 1.19). In the event, and as the experience of the 2006 fee system might have suggested, competition on price did not develop, with all universities rapidly moving to charging tuition fees at or very near to the £9,000 maximum. Although further education colleges teaching at degree level typically charge fees of around £6,000, this does not appear to have created competitive tension between the two sets of institutions, serving as they do substantially separate student markets.

The White Paper is notable for the large number of assertions it makes, without producing evidence to support them: the combination of 'brittle certainty ... and evidence-free gambling' noted in a later quotation in this paper. This approach features strongly in the paragraphs calling for more private, for-profit provision ('alternative providers' being the preferred term). As I have argued, it is not made clear in the White Paper what the problem is to which for-profit providers are the solution, other than vague references to 'different strengths' (Temple, 2013: 167), but that detail was clearly not allowed to stand in the way of a major expansion. While a small number of for-profit colleges are entirely reputable, it is hard to see how most of the others contribute usefully to a varied and high-quality higher education landscape. The very large number of them – a 2013 figure of 674 (BIS, 2013) is now probably an under-estimate – and their constant closings and openings make any administrative oversight impractical. (Non-profit private institutions are in a quite separate position: actually, there is little technical difference between a 'private university' – as the University of Buckingham describes itself, for example – and the rest of the university sector.)

Consider, for example, the long list of for-profit colleges with the words 'London', 'College', and 'Business' in their title. The London College of Business Sciences, to make a random selection, was established in 2010 and has changed ownership three times since then. It is not, then, particularly surprising that the QAA in a 2014 report found that 'The College's ... management of academic standards ... is not fully effective'. Among other difficulties, although the College was supposed to have an Academic Board and a Board of Examiners, there was no 'evidence that the Board [of Examiners] had ever met' and 'the College could not provide any minutes of meetings of the [Academic] Board'. In pursuit of the White Paper's competitiveness policies, it is expected that £1 billion will be spent in the current year on student fee support in institutions such as this. Our late colleague David Watson used to argue that an important strength of UK higher

education was what he called its controlled reputational range (Watson, 2009: 113): at least since the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) began validating polytechnic degree programmes in the mid-1960s, the most and the least academically distinguished UK university institutions have recognizably inhabited the same educational universe. The actions flowing from the 2011 White Paper are effectively destroying this notion. This is another example of the scale and pace of change in higher education since 2010, contributing to the re-making of a landscape which had existed for most of the post-war period.

Almost all of these for-profit colleges teach for the awards of other institutions, and the number of degree-awarding institutions has also grown sharply since 2010. The White Paper reduced the minimum student numbers needed to apply for a university title from 4,000 to 1,000 (the traditional requirement that the institution had to undertake research to gain a university title had already been removed by the previous government). The then Minister, David Willetts, announced in 2012 that a further ten institutions were to be put forward for university titles, at the same time removing legal barriers to private companies buying existing universities. In the event, the legislation needed for these and other changes was not put forward by the government, leaving the higher education sector in an uncertain regulatory situation: again, a completely new situation. These newly created universities, along with the financial support for 'alternative providers', have had implications across the established higher education sector.

'The student experience' has become an organizing concept in higher education management in the last decade or so, bringing together the different legs of 'the student journey' – application, arrival, interactions with study, life at the university, and ending with graduation – under a single management framework, although the details differ between universities (Morgan, 2012). Recent research has shown that the changes in the English higher education landscape noted here – higher tuition fees, increased competitive pressures, uncertainties over government policies beyond the very short term, and other matters – have led to even greater emphasis being placed on managing the student experience, which has in turn affected institutional priorities and even cultures (Temple *et al.*, 2014). These changes, then, have taken place during the last few years, and have had a major impact on institutions.

The universities that appear to be most affected are the non-research-intensive 'recruiting' universities (the majority, in terms of institutions and student numbers), rather than the higher-status 'selecting' universities, although it seems that all universities have been affected to some extent. Because the income of non-research universities now depends almost entirely on student fees – rather than, as before, on a mixture of Funding Council grants for teaching plus (formerly lower) fees – there is an even greater emphasis on marketing aimed at student recruitment, with academic programmes being tailored to meet apparent student preferences. These pressures are intersecting with new demands from students in institutions, who, in the new high-fee regime, are believed to be seeing themselves increasingly as assertive customers buying a product in a competitive marketplace. This may be appropriate when the products are catering or accommodation services; less happy outcomes are observed when the product is believed to be a degree. There is some evidence that university managements are actually seeing their roles from this customer/contractor perspective to a greater extent than are many students – but who then respond by living up (or perhaps down) to expectations by indeed acting as customers. The annual National Student Survey (NSS), and similar surveys by commercial organizations, add further pressures, with university managements demanding that academic staff achieve better scores for their teaching work in these surveys – which can lead to a version of 'teaching to the test'. A narrow definition of student needs – put crudely, giving students what they say they want – then develops, at the expense of broader perspectives which might include, to take one list, developing qualities of integrity, carefulness, courage, resilience, self-discipline, and respect for others (Barnett, 2007: 102).

The White Paper's aim of creating a more competitive higher education system, more responsive to student demands, has to a considerable extent, on the evidence set out here, been achieved. And of course many positive developments can arise from giving close attention to students' ideas about how their teaching and learning is being conducted: probably most university teachers will have seen how their own courses have been improved through student comments at course review committees and so on. But there are clear signs that institutional cultures, particularly in non-research universities, have changed to focus on a particular definition of student needs rather than seeking to involve students in collegial-style decision-making. This in turn is creating two distinct classes of university: a small, elite, research-oriented group, with market positions which allow them to be largely 'selecting' institutions in terms of student recruitment and with what might be called traditional approaches to the relationship between students and their university; and a larger group, with an emphasis on so-called managerialism rather than collegiality, resulting in target-setting and close monitoring of staff performance and consequential uncertainty of employment, in the interests of meeting perceived student/customer needs. As Barnett, anticipating these trends a short while ago, has put it: 'For over a hundred and fifty years, it has been acceptable to talk of "the idea of the university". Now, that phrasing, with its implication that there is or could be simply a single idea of the university, is problematic' (Barnett, 2011: 1).

In this new landscape, reflecting on these changes, Callender and Scott have argued that:

academic leadership may be valued less highly than the 'business planning' skills needed to manage the new fees and funding environment ... Collegially determined (and largely self-policing norms), rooted in trust, could be replaced by performance measures and management targets ... The reform of English higher education may not be successful in producing the market university, but it is certainly likely to provide a powerful stimulus to the development of the managerial university

(Callender and Scott, 2013: 217).

And as our late colleague David Watson put it in one of his last pieces of writing, considering the current state of higher education policy:

We ended up with a mess. The coalition government, which entered the 2010 election with the two parties holding diametrically opposed policies on higher education, is currently struggling with the implementation of the policies in their [White] paper *Students at the Heart of the System*. Framework 12 [the post-2010 structure for the organization of higher education and, on Watson's estimation, the 12th such framework since the 1963 Robbins report] exhibits the characteristic mixture throughout this half-century of reform of brittle certainty, uncertainty and evidence-free gambling on the outcomes

(Watson, 2014).

This is not, I suggest, a legacy on which the British government of 2010–15 can look back with pride.

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