



# METIS

The journal of IPPR@universities,  
the student thinktank network  
[IPPR@universities](mailto:IPPR@universities)

Edited by Angela Tang  
and Harriet Craft

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## EDUCATION

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## ABOUT IPPR@UNIVERSITIES

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For the students participating in the IPPR@universities programme, we believe it offers an opportunity for them to enhance their understanding of policymaking and politics, to see their thinking reach a wider audience, and to build their enthusiasm and skills in policymaking, potentially equipping them for a future career in the area.

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**IPPR@universities**

# FOREWORD

**Angela Tang and  
Harriet Craft**  
Co-editors

This year's edition of *Metis* shows how far the IPPR@universities programme has come in the last year. While last year's journal symbolised the partnership between Warwick University and IPPR, this year's journal sees the collaboration of ideas between students from both Warwick and Sheffield universities. This collaboration highlights the beginning of IPPR@universities as a national network of student thinktanks. Alongside Sheffield, King's College London also joined the programme in early 2011. Through the IPPR@universities programme, all three universities and IPPR aim to help students throughout the United Kingdom to be connected to the front line of thinktank research and policy analysis.

*Metis* aims to provide students with the opportunity to engage with the policy process and gives them a unique platform to express opinions, critiques and solutions. It also has created a support network between political thinkers at a university level across the country, and also with experts in the policy and thinktank field. This platform is particularly important given the current political climate that faces students, academics and experts alike. Our choice of this year's theme –education – emphasises the importance of a constructive dialogue between students, regardless of degree discipline and background, on policy matters. Education is arguably one of the most important factors in improving people's lives. This past year has seen anger and a clear backlash against the increase in tuition fees and reduction of the education maintenance allowance. The passion and determination seen in both education receivers and education providers highlights how contentious the issue is and proves that a decent standard of universal education is something worth fighting for.

The journal is divided into three main groupings that tackle different areas of the education debate. The first section is related to the philosophy of education. Gann's article explores the philosophy of education, and what role this takes. The second section is a little larger, and explores the area of compulsory education. Buhova explores why equality in education is vital and looks to the international community for answers. Vittery continues this international theme, and analyses the Scandinavian model of education to see if there are any clear improvements on the British system. The last article in this section is by Goggs and explores the debate surrounding the increased localisation or centralisation of our compulsory education system. The third and final section is on universities specifically. Chakravorty's article mirrors Buhova's exploration of the need for equality and fair access within our university system. The next three

articles each explore the contentious issue of funding for universities. Scarlett explores the possibility of a graduate tax, Conn analyses the relationship between the private sector and course type, and finally Shreeve analyses the overall debate around the funding of higher education.

The creation and continuation of *Metis* and the rest of IPPR@ universities programme has given like-minded students across the country an opportunity to link up, under invaluable guidance from the IPPR team. It has been a pleasure working with all areas of the team and we would both like to thank everyone for their hard work to ensure that the standard of work produced is professional and of a high level. We would also like to give special thanks to the Politics and International Studies Department at Warwick University and The Exchange at Sheffield University for their continued support.

Lastly we would like to thank the following individuals who participated as members of the editorial board, dedicating their time to help with the publication of this issue: Mark Ballinger, Dalia Ben-Galim, Laura Chappell, Glenn Gottfried, Jenni Viitanen, Jonathan Clifton, Leo Ringer, Michael Johnson, Nick Pearce, Rick Muir, Tamsin Crimmens, Tim Finch, Tony Dolphin and Will Paxton.

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

## HOW PRINCIPLES CONFLICT

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Examining education from a philosophical point of view throws up a number of questions, including, the relationship between parents, children and society, the fundamental objectives of education, and the nature of distribution of resources. In short, thinking about education means thinking about the very same questions with which much of political philosophy is concerned. Elaborating extensively on these themes would stretch the limits of this short essay, so it will be constrained to giving a brief outline of some of the issues that lie at the heart of talking about education from a philosophical point of view, touching on the aims of education, on parents' influence on education and, finally, and on the issue of equal opportunity.

### **Parents, children and society**

Before talking about how education should be distributed or who is to determine its contents and take responsibility for its supervision, it is of interest to define who ought to be educated and why. Society is composed of individuals, each with his or her own preferences and a concept of the life they consider is worth pursuing. There is no reason to suppose that these individuals are not equally able to make choices that will determine their path through life, or that other people are in a superior position to make these choices for them. We can therefore grant the individual a large amount of autonomy in order for them to make their own decisions. Brighouse (2006) sees this as a prerequisite for an individual being able to fully weigh the implications of alternative lifestyles and being content with the educated choices they make. However, the individual only has a complete understanding of their desires and tastes upon reaching adulthood – children lack the capability to make fully autonomous decisions.

Education is therefore necessary in order for children to attain the maturity of adulthood and to be able to put themselves in a position to make judicious decisions about their own lives. Furthermore, education enables them to take up jobs and participate in civil society. Society itself has an interest in having educated citizens, as an educated citizenry is a necessity for guaranteeing a stable and active society. Arguments for education can therefore be made both in terms of empowering the individual as well as the strengthening of civil society.

### **Who decides what is taught?**

Having provided some (very brief) reasons as to why education is necessary, it is of interest to consider who is to decide on how children are educated and according to what curriculum. At first it would appear blindingly obvious that a child's parents ought to have the final say over

their education and upbringing. But, as Brighthouse (2003) points out, while parents do indeed have fundamental rights over the upbringing of their offspring, this does not mean that limits cannot (and ought not) be imposed upon their freedom to educate them as they wish. Although curtailment of the influence that parents have over their children is often portrayed as an affront to the parents' liberty, it is important to acknowledge that the education children receive has a strong influence on their autonomy in adulthood. All children ought to be brought up and educated in such way that they are able to make independent decisions and exercise full autonomy as individuals when they are adults.

However, if parents have unrestricted control over their child's education, they might choose education, for example, of a religiously or politically fundamentalist nature, which could seriously hamper the autonomy of that child in later life. Of course, even an education based on a consensus within society is doubtlessly capable of restricting a child's freedom of thought later on in life, but a requirement that parents' choices over education comply with some sort of standard set by a democratic society provides at least some form of protection for a child's future ability to make their own decisions.

### **Aiming for equality**

The principle of providing a level of education to all children so that they have an equal chance of achieving their potential may not seem problematic. But it does present some difficulties. Fishkin (1987) identifies a 'trilemma' between organising education according to principles of either merit, equal life chances, and family autonomy, with only two of the three being realisable at any one time. If, for example, there were to be procedural fairness through which every child was given equal chances to fulfil its natural ability, then the autonomy of the family would have to be violated in order to prevent parents from exerting any influence, either positive or negative, over the education of their children.

It is also possible to contest the idea that society should only intervene to tackle inequalities that result of social disadvantage. Why should genetic differences not also be taken into account when trying to ensure equal opportunity? Jencks (1988) believes this discrepancy to be related to the question of practicality, with genetic differences being even harder to remedy than differences in upbringing.

Furthermore, the multitude of different concepts of 'equal opportunity' makes it even harder to establish which criteria and methods are to govern education: 'equality' for some might mean simply treating everyone in an equal fashion; for others, the rewarding of merit; and for others still, a utilitarian approach that maximizes welfare within society.

The conflict between the three principles and the essential question of what is actually meant by equal opportunity, and the extent of which it should be implemented, mean that a well-defined ideal of how education is to be organised, and what principles it strives to achieve, will probably be too difficult to establish. Democratic societies

place great importance on the values of liberty and equality, and view the family as a fundamental institution worth protecting. However, these dominant values appear to be in conflict with one another and would have to be subject to an ordering according to priority and importance, which, given the nature of democracy, would arguably require an unachievable level of consensus.

Alternatives to an explicit prioritisation of values would appear to offer a better route. For example, the poor performance of children within inner-city schools or those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds might be improved by schemes that tie teachers' pay to their performance or through the establishment of voucher schemes that enable parents to choose the school their child is to attend based on the school's record. It has been argued that making schools compete for pupils and the funding attached to them introduces a competitive element to the education system (Friedman 1962). Schools will vie with one another to provide the best services to prospective pupils, and, driven by market forces, will attempt to offer more educational opportunities at a lower cost. Rewarding teachers according to their ability to improve pupils test scores is said to help promote best practices, drive out teachers who fail to meet their targets and motivate teachers to engage more with their pupils. Unfortunately, studies that measure the effects of the implementation of such policies provide only mixed evidence for the efficacy of these schemes (Ladd 2002, Rouse 1998, Hoxby 2003).

## Conclusion

It appears that the fundamental dilemma of educational policy – namely the relationship between families, children and social institutions – is insurmountable. Apart from the child's natural ability, studies measuring the impact of family repeatedly highlight its importance for development of the child (Fredman and Stevenson 1990). Interventions by social institutions and public policy have much less impact and have struggled to counteract the negative influences of family. The problem of highly-educated citizens taking a more active interest in the education of their children and influencing the policy process to their benefit will be hard to eradicate and poses a considerable threat to any serious reforms of the education system.

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EDUCATED

## WHY EQUALITY MATTERS IN EDUCATION

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This article aims to analyse methods to mitigate educational disadvantage, focusing in particular on two US attempts: 'No Child Left Behind' and the charter school movement. In the first case, although the scheme allows schools to take up measures such as extra tuition time and science-based research activities and regulates school success with academic thresholds, the evidence suggests that the inequality gap has simply increased as schools have focused on skills for the test rather than more broad education. Regarding the charter school movement, removing the regulations of the state has allowed schools and teachers to be more dynamic in the way they educate the young but with inconsistent academic success.

### Education and equality

Policymakers seek high academic performance because it reaps various social benefits. A typical example is higher employability, which reduces the social class divisions (Lynch and Baker 2005). A more peculiar one, however, would be the compound growth effect on the economy<sup>1</sup> – in short, the reason why some countries achieve better economic success than others – which is owed to the cognitive skills, innovations and technology that are the logical consequences of education. We should no longer be surprised by the positive effect of human capital on economic growth in the long run (Mankiw et al 1992). Unsurprisingly, the education of an individual is among the vital long-term solutions in the four main contexts in which inequality can be seen in a society: economic, political, sociocultural and affective (Lynch and Baker 2005). What is more difficult to picture is how to achieve high educational performance throughout society.

This paper will focus on the mitigation of educational disadvantage as it manifests in inequalities of opportunities and the unrealised potential of young people. Parental wealth and ethnic background are considered predominant factors for children's achievements (Wilson 1975, Tough 2006, McKinsey & Co 2007). This implies that the reproduction of class inequality is perpetuated in the structure of the educational system via the positive correlation between income and high-quality education. Consequently, one should reorganise the structure of education in order to minimise the educational gap in a society.

The McKinsey & Company report (2007) pinpoints three features the world's top-performing education systems have in common:

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1 Technological progress sustains economic growth in the long run in the endogenous growth model, based on the Solow model of growth.



employing the right people to become teachers, developing them into effective instructors with high standards and expectations for what students should achieve, and ensuring, especially through monitoring and intervening schemes, that the system delivers the best possible instruction to every child. Thus, contrary to the view that only richer localities can enjoy better schools and education, recent studies from OECD countries reveal that education systems following such as prescription can overcome students' low-income and minority backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the US provides two examples of efforts aimed at improving the education of minority and poor students,<sup>3</sup> as well as minimising the gap between their attainment and that of middle class students.

### **No Child Left Behind**

Relating to elementary and secondary schools, the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act works on a national level. 'There's an achievement gap in America that's not good for the future of this country. Some kids can read at grade level, and some can't. And that's unsatisfactory', said President Bush, as he presented the legislation.

The initial goal of the act, signed in 2002, was to make all children proficient in reading, mathematics and science by 2014. Currently, the law demands every state to set its own criteria for reading and for mathematics proficiency and to run annual standardised tests for students from grades three to eight to report on whether schools have achieved the annual goal. Failure to comply results in funding cuts, various sanctions and even the shutdown of schools. This focus on student academic growth regardless of the initial performance based on common expectations for all can increase accountability for both students and teachers (Tough 2006). The law presumes it can improve the quality of education and instruction by requiring and funding parent involvement programmes, professional development activities, scientifically-based research and additional tutorial hours when needed.<sup>4</sup> Since its enactment, however, there have been numerous criticisms about its efficiency.

One of the strongest is the motivation of the schools to deceive the system. The legal penalties are believed to have created incentive for states to manipulate the test results and lower their standards. Since 2007, 71 per cent of public schools reduced the time spent on non-tested subjects and focused mainly on skills for the test – the so-called 'teach for the test' effect. Openly lowered educational standards became a common practice, as in the case of Mississippi, where 89 per cent of fourth-graders were deemed to be proficient

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2 The reports highlight that Finland has the best-performing systems, based on effective mechanisms to support every failing student, which minimise the variation of performance between schools.

3 In the US, the test score gaps between white and black students and between poor and better-off children tend to overlap. Black and minority children are three times more likely to be poor than white children (see Tough 2006).

4 The NCLB budget has been increased on several occasions. The current budget is \$24.4 billion and President Obama proposed an addition of \$3 billion this year. See <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/02/02062006.html>

in reading on state tests, but only 18 per cent achieved that level on the national assessment of educational progress. The impact of such survival strategies further widens the gap in educational quality between high-poverty schools and the rest.

The main critique, however, comes from the quantitative evidence that the student achievement gap has actually grown since the enactment of NCLB. In 2002, 13 per cent of African American eighth-graders were proficient in reading, according to the standard measure of grade-level competence. In 2005, however, that number had dropped to 12 per cent, and the proportion of poor students (measured by their eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches) proficient in reading fell from 17 to 15 per cent. The overall educational performance of the US on PISA<sup>5</sup> between 2002 and 2005 showed that the strength of the relationship between performance and socioeconomic background is above the OECD average. Moreover, regardless of the lower number of poorly performing students, their number was still high relative to the overall performance in the US (OECD 2006). More than 70 per cent of the lowest performers come from high-poverty and minority schools, which tend not to pass the annual tests and so either close or become more segregated by race and class, as students who can afford to leave do so. As some might argue in this case that the public schools lose ground while the private schools gain on the rankings, one should bear in mind that educational policies need years to prove effective or ineffective.

### **Charter schools**

Charter schools provide a second potential solution to the problem of educational equality. These schools do not operate under the same rules as apply to public schools, but are a part of the public educational system. The largest network of this kind is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), aimed at educating the low-income and minority students.

The assumption behind charter schools is that minority and poor children are deprived of the opportunity to develop some cognitive and behavioural skills, which are of crucial importance for success in the public educational system; therefore, they cannot benefit from it. KIPP's approach is often called 'no excuses', and includes a long school day and year, selective teacher hiring, strict behaviour norms and the promotion of a strong student work ethic. Organisations such as Teach First for America attract motivated university graduates to teach, offering working experience while ensuring good-quality teaching where it is needed the most. Instructors such as Annette Lareau, Dacia Toll, David Levin and Michael Feinberg established educational patterns to encourage high academic performance among the 'bad students' of the general educational system. In other words, the charter schools aim at academic quality, efficiency and results.

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5 The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an internationally standardised assessment that was jointly developed by participating economies and administered to 15-year-olds in schools. See <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>

Charter schools are both criticised and acknowledged for their performance. Some scholars question charter schools' wider efficiency, due to the predominant inclusion of only those students who 'bother' to enrol and the exclusion of those who lack the motivation to do so (Rothstein 2010). However, Toll replies that they need just enough kids from low-income background to prove their methods successful and educate these children to the best of their ability. She adds that 'an equal education is not good enough' as these children need 'better' education in order to catch up.

It should be noted that every charter school establishes its own curriculum and, therefore, these schools tend to show ambiguous results. In 2007, more than 80 per cent of the eighth-graders from high-poverty neighbourhoods like Newark, New Haven or the Bronx scored proficiency rates at least 12 percentage points above the state average. However, in 2009, CREDO's report showed that out of 2,403 charter schools, 43 per cent showed gains in maths that were statistically indistinguishable from the average among their public counterparts.

Furthermore, charter schools produce different impacts based on their students' family backgrounds – for Blacks and Hispanics, learning gains are significantly lower than for their counterparts at traditional schools. However, charter schools manifested better academic growth results than the public system for students in poverty and 'English language learners'. Students in special education programmes have about the same outcomes (CREDO 2009).

On the other hand, another study shows that charter schools applying the key elements of KIPP's 'no excuses' model in Boston produced noteworthy achievement gains, at least as measured on statewide standardised tests (Angrist et al 2010). Regardless of these confusing results, charter schools demonstrate some success with certain groups of students.

### **Looking ahead**

The need for academic achievement in all social groups inspires political disputes about further educational reforms. In March 2010, President Obama proposed a reform that calls on states to adopt new academic standards and to build towards fully preparing all students towards college and careers by the time they leave high school. The ongoing debate is about the academic success the schools can achieve and if the reform should include the charter school model in its blueprints. Possibly, many NCLB drawbacks could be offset by the rigid charter school patterns, so the educational system should include some of them in relation to poor children and English language learners. On the other hand, the advantages of the traditional public system with regards to ethnic and minority students should be preserved according to the needs of each US state. Poverty and social inequality are not excuses but reasons for societal problems which should be addressed with an effective educational system. Education could eradicate social inequalities and give high economic

returns in the long run; however, it should also be structured in a way that reflects the sociocultural, economic and political needs of the society in which it is working.

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# THE SCANDINAVIAN MODEL

## THE HISTORY AND SUCCESS OF FREE SCHOOLS IN SWEDEN

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In 1992, Sweden began a free school revolution with a dramatic change in education policy that allowed for-profit organisations and local interest groups to create new schools to challenge those of local authorities. The concept has since been taken up by several countries, with similar schemes being set up in the US, Canada, China and now the UK. In this essay, I look at why and how this transformation took place, and consider how successful has it been since its inception.

### **The history of Swedish education and the role of the public sector**

Before the introduction of the free school policy, Swedish children had been compelled to attend the school in their local municipality. This followed a major overhaul in the 1960s which put in place a comprehensive system of state schools based on the principle of educational equality. Comprehensive education was just one part of the development of the Swedish social security system, from which private providers were excluded on egalitarian grounds.

Historically, the Swedish state has always had a greater role in welfare than in countries such as Britain. During the 19th century welfare institutions such as hospitals, schools and poorhouses were generally run by private suppliers in Britain, with the state only filling in around the edges. In Sweden these institutions were always operated by the state (Green 1990).

In education specifically, the Swedish state had ensured universality of attendance by the end of the 19th century, and generous funding allowed public schools to compete with private ones, leading to a decline in significance for the private sector (Wiborg 2009). While the quality of education generally mirrored class divisions of the time, a succession of Liberal governments began to break down these barriers through the increased use of middle schools, which acted as an intermediate step between and primary and secondary education.

However, the 1970s and '80s saw an increase in budget deficits as a result of economic decline, leading to neoliberal policies having greater sway and an increased emphasis on choice. More conservative commentators criticised the size and productivity of the public sector, and advocated the introduction of some market mechanisms – an idea eventually endorsed by the Social Democratic government, which held political power for the majority of Sweden's post-war history (Blomqvist 2004). As in Britain, therefore, the reform of the education system is not wholly associated with the right, but also with 'third way' thinking on the centre-left.

## The introduction of free schools

In Sweden, the decision to open up the education system to competition was taken by the centre-right government of Carl Bildt. The 1992 legislation, coupled with an earlier transfer of funding responsibility from the state to local authorities, allowed for the creation of independent free public schools which received similar funding per-pupil to municipal schools. This highlights a shift in the focus from that of equal education to one of equal competition, decentralisation and choice, and was consistent with several other decentralising reforms of the period (Ahlin 2003).

While the free schools were to have a greater degree of autonomy than those of the local authority, they were still obliged to follow the national curriculum, were inspected as before, and were not allowed to select students based on academic ability, ethnicity or socio-economic characteristics (Bohlmark and Lindahl 2008). British free 'faith schools', which represented our only semi-autonomous schooling at the time, differed slightly here in that they were allowed to select pupils based on religion. While Swedish organisations wishing to set up a school must apply to the state for a licence, very few unsuccessful applications have been made, and the board which decides on acceptability is autonomous from the government, albeit answerable to it, and therefore not subject to political pressures. Local municipalities are not allowed to veto a proposed new school, or have any major impact on the decision as to whether or not a licence is given. No stipulation is made regarding the purposes of the school, be it for profit, not-for-profit, religious and so on. Indeed, the reforms even allow for parents to open up schools of their own should they deem it necessary – something that has happened in a few cases (Westhead 2007).

While private schools did exist in Sweden prior to 1992, they had always accounted for a very small fraction of the education system. The opening of free schools therefore represented a radical departure from the previously regimented system, with little diversity of provision. As mentioned above, despite the idea stemming from neoliberal thinking, the Social Democratic government elected two years after its implementation supported the new system, leading to its consolidation. For the Social Democratic party, free schools represented the 'third way' in action, as they allowed for local choice and an element of marketisation to prevent inertia and stagnation, but retained a role for the state in ensuring that minimum standards were universally met.

The legislation did not lead to complete privatisation of the education sector, dominated by big companies, as some on the left had predicted. The first wave of private schools were generally opened by faith groups, parent cooperatives or other non-profit organisations, and it was not until a second wave of school openings began in the latter half of the decade that profit-seeking organisations began to enter the sector. In this sense, the fear that children's education would be left in the hands of corporate profiteering has

proved unfounded. It is worth pointing out, however, that Sweden's academies are still very much a product of their nation's history. Given the preponderance of social democratic thought in Sweden for much of the last century, the reforms were only a tentative step towards privatisation of the educational sector. While competition was seen as a potential improvement, the state still plays an important part in the educational process: a national body oversees licences, curricula are still set nationally, and several limitations on the new schools such as admissions limits and the requirement to be free are set by the state. The persistence of the state has been summed up by a former minister for education who argues that 'whilst diversity and competition in education is a good thing' there must be 'strict guidelines in place to ensure the quality of education for all children' (McGettigan 2007).

The free schools movement is therefore very typically Swedish. Marketisation has been introduced alongside a very Swedish distrust of the private sector. Although a large number of free schools have been formed, they do not represent a widespread overhaul of the educational system.

### **Evaluating the success of free schools in Sweden**

Free schools have increased in number notably since 1992, with one appearing in 64 per cent of municipalities, accounting for 10 per cent of all students. However, critics have pointed out that they tend to locate in wealthier areas, with Stockholm in particular being much better represented than many poorer rural areas. Twenty-seven per cent of free schools are to be found in Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg (Wiborg 2010), although rural northern Sweden is also surprisingly well represented. Public opinion on free schools has therefore been mixed at best. There are complaints that education is no longer seen as preparation for citizenship but more as preparation for work, and the use of franchising by for-profit schools has been criticised (ibid). Some critics claim free schools have increased class differences, with the children of wealthier, better-educated parents gaining most from their development. Other arguments for and against include the greater parental involvement in local schools and the decrease in information sharing as schools are forced to compete against each other (Skolverket 2006).

Analysis of the success and popularity of Swedish academies has also split largely along ideological lines. Conservative analysts in several countries have pointed to it as a success story to be imitated, while opponents have pointed out that it doesn't appear to offer greatly improved results and indeed may lead to increasing social inequality and segregation (Wiborg 2010). However, two recent studies have tried to objectively analyse the impact of free schools in Sweden, and therefore move beyond the ideological stances taken by politicians and interest groups.

Bjorklund (2005) and Böhlmark and Lindahl (2008) have begun to measure the relative success of free schools compared to their

municipality-run competitors. The former found very little evidence of general educational improvement in municipalities with free schools. However, he did find that competition from free schools did force local authority schools to improve their own standards (Bjorklund et al 2005). Böhlmärk and Lindahl's more comprehensive study found that free schools led to moderate increases in attainment among 16 year-olds in the short term, but they did not find any medium-term educational benefits.

These findings chime with a study by Hsieh and Urquiola (2003) on Chile's similar system. Achievements later in life among those who went to new free schools were not also judged to have been enhanced by their attendance. However, there was a difference across classes: children from wealthier families did see some benefits, while those from poorer or immigrant families did not. This has led a number of analysts to argue that free schools increase social segregation and inequality.

On the issue of cost, it was expected that the reforms would lead to lower costs to local municipalities. However, this has also not proved to be the case. A mixture of factors has actually led to an increase in educational costs in Sweden. These include agreements between free schools and unions which make it difficult to make staff redundant, shifting pupil bases, long-term building contracts, and the requirement to maintain a certain level of education (Böhlmärk and Lindahl 2008).

The teaching experience provided by the new schools is more limited than those of the existing schools – fewer free school teachers have university qualifications than their counterparts at state schools, and they have not been teaching for as long. Furthermore, the relationship between teachers and free schools has come more to resemble that of managers and employees in a business environment (Wiborg 2009).

However, the system of choice has become successfully integrated into the Swedish system, suggesting it does have widespread appeal. This is particularly noticeable among parents, whose greater input in many cases has led to increased school satisfaction for those whose children go to free schools (New Schools Network). Moreover the creation of choice in the school system, something that previously did not exist, has generally been seen as a positive contribution.

One of the more controversial aspects of the new schooling laws has been establishment of faith schools. Schools teaching to a particular religious denomination now make up 10 per cent of the nation's free schools. Most of these are from mainstream Christian, Muslim and Jewish organisations, but more controversial ones have been set up by the Church of Scientology and the Plymouth Brethren. This has led to a split in public opinion on whether faith groups should be allowed to run schools. A number of high-profile scandals relating to faith schools, especially in relation to the teaching of sciences, led to increasing calls for the government to intervene. A new education act was drafted as a result to 'sharpen' the previous education legislation,



stating that religious teaching must be factual and must not force students to participate in religious activities (The Local 2010).

## Conclusion

Independent free schools have become an entrenched element of the Swedish education sector. Despite a strong debate over the changes, they have been successful in introducing non-governmental organisations into schooling. While an element of state control has been maintained, this has not put off for-profit organisations from opening such schools. Certain controversies have inevitably surfaced, but the free schools have become increasingly popular and now account for a healthy minority of schools in Sweden.

However, the educational benefits are debatable, and much of the reporting on it has been severely politically biased. More objective studies have tended to show that the benefits have been small and short-term, with no evidence yet showing long-term benefits to pupils. Despite predictions that the reforms would cut educational costs, this has not occurred. The main criticism is that the new system has increased social segregation, a claim that creates controversy in countries such as the UK, which are following the Swedish free school model.

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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND THE CASE FOR LOCALISATION

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Superficially, the policy proposal that I present in this paper is a simple one. In essence, I advocate the use of the principle of subsidiarity – by which power is devolved to the most local competent authority – in applying the national curriculum. The case I advance is for a moderate and pragmatic curriculum policy, one which first and foremost has British schoolchildren as its primary beneficiaries.

This is not to argue against the notion of a national curriculum. I wholly endorse the view of a former education secretary, Anthony Crosland, that the curriculum must not be a mere dialogue between teacher and pupil: ‘a secret garden in which only teachers and children are allowed to walk’ (in Ward and Eden 2009). However, just as an individual teacher should not be left to decide what the children in their class should be learning, so an individual secretary of state should not be deciding what every child in the country should be learning. The latter may have their own views about curricular priorities, and of course in government he or she is strongly placed to argue for their implementation. But if instinctual whims and personal prejudices are allowed to permeate unchecked through to government policy, the curriculum moves from being a nominally descriptive and open-ended instrument to become a prescriptive diktat; not simply ‘a neutral assemblage of knowledge’ but ‘part of a selective tradition ... [of] some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge’ (Apple 1993).

## **The origins of the national curriculum**

The notion of a prescribed curriculum has developed with the public schools system.<sup>1</sup> Up to the mid-19th century, education largely depended on the largesse of wealthy patrons, and so politicians were not well placed to dictate what was taught in schools. However, the development of public education, and subsequent mass education enfranchisement, gave the government the opportunity to step in. Ministers could argue that Westminster had to ensure that allocated public funds were being used prudently and effectively, and they therefore assumed central control of the elementary school curriculum.

As the Newcastle Commission set out in 1861, the goal was ‘to institute a searching examination by a competent authority of every child in every school to which grants are to be paid with the view of ascertaining whether these indispensable elements of knowledge are thoroughly acquired and to make the prospects and position of the

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1 Throughout the course of this paper, I shall refer to any school receiving state funds in any form as ‘public’; therefore, despite the traditional nomenclature, privately-financed schools will be referred to as ‘independent’.

teacher dependent, to a considerable extent, on the results of this examination' (in Kirk 1989).

This system was centred on 'payment by results' and chimed well with those in government who favoured a rudimentary and monolithic 'four Rs' programme for public schooling. However, even this level of central control did not survive into the 20th century. The Newcastle Commission policy was abolished in 1895, and thereafter the government's grip on the curriculum lessened substantially throughout the first half of the new century. This policy stance of curricular non-interference remained the consensus view of the immediate post-war period, and was crisply articulated by the Labour minister of education George Tomlinson when he said the 'minister knows nowt about curriculum'.

Indeed, it was not until 1976, and the celebrated 'Ruskin speech' given by then-prime minister James Callaghan, that the groundwork for a core curriculum to respond to a widespread skill deficiency, particularly among school-leavers, was laid. Callaghan risked the ire of the teaching profession, but the government was not willing to keep off the grass of the 'secret garden' much longer.

A consequent green paper avowed that certain common principles needed to be agreed upon and established in a uniform school curriculum, and so plans for a formal national document were set in legislative motion.

### **The 1988 model: politicisation and prescriptivism**

With the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1988, the national curriculum came into being, despite splitting the Tory ranks. Several Thatcherite MPs argued the bill would compromise the power and efficiency of the market, but this was to mischaracterise the legislation.

The national curriculum was indeed centrally controlled to ensure, as Baker (2010) argued, that children could 'slot [more] easily into the framework of education' if families were mobile. However, such a measure in fact gives potential for increased marketisation of education, and lays the foundations for free competition within the state-maintained sector.

At root, the objective of this marketisation and curricular centralisation, at least rhetorically, was to enable transparency and consistency in the state system, giving parents greater choice of educational options (Whitty 1989). Of course, a considerable advantage of a state-controlled curriculum, in addition to maintaining country-wide continuity in learning, is that the aptitude of a school and its pupils can be relatively easily quantified and compared, so a child's personal development is not at the mercy of his or her teacher's individual idiosyncrasies.<sup>2</sup> However, as mentioned above, the national curriculum can fall victim to similar preferences, political or personal, in Whitehall.

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2 David Coulby (2000) refers to this situation as the problem of a 'canine curriculum', in which a hypothetical teacher, being a dog-lover, sets a course of learning heavily centered around her particular interest and/or specialism, perhaps neglecting more important educational requirements in the process.

For instance, when Kenneth Clark assumed the role of education secretary, he argued that history ended and ‘current affairs’ began in the 1960s – making events after the 1950s unsuitable, in his opinion, for historical study. According to David Coulby (2000), these and other decisions were policy positions taken ‘against the advice of the relevant working group’ thus ‘amounting to little more than the curricular imposition of personal prejudice’ in the guise of ‘official knowledge’. It is obvious that to subject the curriculum to such highly subjective interventions is unlikely to produce good educational outcomes.

Moreover, the synchronisation of the curriculum, and the need to achieve best possible national test scores to make a school competitive in the market, can often lead teachers to reduce a wide spectrum of knowledge to a narrower stock of ‘need-to-know’ information. This has led to the proliferation of ‘teaching to the test’ and reduced learning to the revision of certain facts readily regurgitated in examinations – and just as readily forgotten.

In terms of broad policy aims, to simultaneously assume central responsibility for the curriculum and national testing while at the same time devolving responsibility for management and expenditure to head teachers, the 1988 Act seems to be oddly antithetical. However, for the Thatcher administration, the intended effect was not pedagogical but political. As Ward and Eden (2009) note: ‘It was the Conservative government’s political intention to limit the power of left-wing Labour-controlled local authorities, particularly the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). So while the 1988 Act appears to devolve power from government to schools, it actually increased the power of central government.’

Therefore, this contradiction within the legislation was premeditated, though not with the implicit intention of increasing the power of central government per se. Rather, central government hoped to reduce the influence of elected authorities in primarily urban conurbations, predominantly controlled by Labour, who would otherwise ‘avidly and enthusiastically pursue policies contrary to, or at least divergent from [their own]’ (Coulby 2000). Yet when the Labour Party was elected in 1997, the balance of central/local power was not redressed, with New Labour displaying in its policy stances ‘a disposition for centralised reforms based on the neoliberal “financialisation of everything”’ coupled with an ‘inherited attack on public sector professionalism’ (Gunter and Forrester 2010).

This stance on curriculum policy is, in my view, unfit for purpose in the 21st century.

### **What now for the national curriculum?**

It is inevitable and right that elected representatives should take an interest and responsibility for education standards, but this would best be achieved if the power over the curriculum was delegated to the lowest appropriate level. Central government should of course set out

the aims, objectives and key skills to be fostered, but it should be the responsibility of independent, cross-party bodies to formulate specific programmes in their areas.

No party should have total control of curriculum policy: education is a cross-bench concern, and the make-up of the organisations formulating policy should reflect that. These authorities should be accountable and include parents in the decision-making process, producing regular reports about policy decisions, and holding focus groups with parents, local businesses and others, in order to glean their insight and conceive policy with broad approval.

Such subsidiarity is impeccably attuned to our times – what is David Cameron’s ‘big society’ if not a project for devolving power to the lowest appropriate level? Schools from Bognor to Berwick should be left to choose how they can deliver basic national standards in ways that suit their particular circumstances.

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# HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK

## AN APPRAISAL OF THE STATUS QUO

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Under the Labour government, the higher education system in England underwent considerable reform: the introduction of tuition fees, alongside policies to widen participation, particularly among disadvantaged groups; reform to higher education provision; and encouragement of higher education participation through programmes like AimHigher. This article seeks to evaluate the state of higher education in three key areas: access to higher education, particularly for disadvantaged groups, quality of provision within the UK, and the outcomes of participation in higher education.

### **Access**

The percentage of people attending higher education (HE) institutions is rising, with official statistics showing an increase of three per cent between 2006/07 and 2008/09.. But there is a mixed picture in terms of equality of access for underprivileged groups.

The proportion of applicants from lower socioeconomic groups shows an upward trend, with 29.4 per cent applying in 2008, compared to 29 per cent in 2007 (Lipsett 2008), and they are 50 per cent more likely to attend HE institutions than they were 15 years ago (Harris 2010). But while an increasing percentage of students from disadvantaged areas are attending university, they continue to fail to access the best institutions. Of the top 10 UK universities, according to the QS World University Rankings, six are in the bottom 20 in terms of participation by students from disadvantaged areas. These top 10 UK universities also have some of the lowest rates of participation of students who attended state schools and colleges (HESA 2010a).

A report by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) concluded that while an increasing proportion of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were accessing higher education, this increase was not evident in terms of access specifically to highly selective institutions (Harris 2010). While HE entrants rose to 16.1 per cent overall, those entering Russell Group institutions only rose by 1.3 per cent. Therefore, while access to higher education has increased, and become more equal overall, there has been stagnation in levels of absolute or equal access to highly selective institutions.

A-level attainment is the key determinant for entry to selective institutions, and inequality in educational attainment manifests itself within compulsory education. Those from low socioeconomic backgrounds have fallen behind considerably in levels of attainment by the time they leave compulsory education, as evidenced in socioeconomic disparities in attainment at GCSE level (EHRC 2010).

Poor attainment at this level makes it difficult for students to progress into further study. The OFFA report further suggests that a lack of encouragement, expectations or information regarding higher education and appropriate subject selection at A-level also prevents those from lower socioeconomic groups from applying to selective institutions (Hatt and Tate 2010). However, since inequalities are entrenched well before A-level study begins, selective institutions have limited capacity to help disadvantaged students to achieve their educational potential.

The government project AimHigher, established with the aim of redressing such balances through information and mentoring, has shown promising results, yet, worryingly has been discontinued before its effectiveness could be more fully assessed. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, in a report on widening participation schemes at universities, has suggested that selective institutions, namely Russell Group universities, have taken steps to improve transparency and impartiality in recruitment, and that Oxford and other highly selective universities now run outreach schemes to disadvantaged areas. A critique of unequal access to higher education must therefore place most of its scrutiny upon the equality of education provided to students, beginning as early as key stage 1.

While socioeconomic disadvantage is marked, inequality in ethnic minority access is variable, with Asian students outperforming Black students in selective institutions (Vasagar 2010) amid an overall picture of increasing access for ethnic minorities. It is likely that variation is a result of socioeconomic problems faced by prospective students.

### **Quality of provision**

There is evidence that opportunities to attend HE institutes are limited due to limited growth, particularly in the most selective institutions. In 2010, three per cent of applicants failed to gain a place, and there are indications that education places continue to be underprovided (Bawden and Mansell 2010).

Despite a limited number of places available to capable students, the quality of higher education institutions available gives the UK a significant national advantage.<sup>1</sup>

The national student survey, measuring student satisfaction with HE institutions, is a useful measure of the quality of educational provision experienced by its individual consumers. Students continue to record high levels of satisfaction, with 83 per cent stating they were satisfied with the overall teaching of their course. Teaching assessments, resource provision and academic support were also highly rated, with only a relatively less favourable response for assessment and feedback, at 67 per cent (HEFCE 2010). This suggests that HE institutions are largely responsive to the needs of students.

## Outcomes

Outcomes for students can be approached from a number of angles: in terms of degree completion and retention rates, in terms of employment prospects, and in terms of the university experience.

The UK's retention rate stands at 80 per cent for those beginning a full-time degree, which, according to the National Audit Office (NAO 2007) 'compares favourably with most other OECD countries, during a period of expansion in higher education'. The NAO report suggests that those attending highly selective institutions are more likely to continue their degree, while institutions with a more diverse student population have lower retention rates, suggesting that many disadvantaged students drop out due to a lack of support.

Prioritisation of aspects such as job security, flexibility, relevance to subject area, salary and so on will differ between individuals. However, according to the *Student Experience* report (UNITE 2007), the most common reasons for attending university were to gain qualifications (73 per cent), to improve employment prospects (65 per cent) and to improve earning potential (44 per cent). This suggests that high graduate employment and entry to graduate level jobs are key indicators of satisfactory outcomes. Average graduate employment six months after graduation is falling: in 2008/09 it was 59 per cent, down from 64 per cent in 2006/07. Of those employed graduates, around 68 per cent work in graduate-level jobs. These figures suggest that short-term prospects could be disappointing for many recent graduates.

Employment prospects are related to the course studied and the institution attended. Those graduating from institutions within the top 10 were more likely than average to be employed in graduate-level jobs: for example, 86 per cent for Oxford and Cambridge graduates, and 81 per cent for those from Durham.<sup>2</sup> Students who studied subjects such as medicine or dentistry continue to have negligible rates of unemployment. By contrast, those graduating in IT and computing reported 16.3 per cent unemployment, and those graduating in media studies reported 14.6 per cent unemployment in 2009 – both up from previous years (HESCU 2010a). Salaries six months after graduation continue to hover around the £20,000 mark (HESA 2010b).

Among recently employed graduates, surveys have shown limited initial job satisfaction (HESCU 2010a). However, graduate outcomes were far more positive in the long term: three-and-a-half years after graduation, more than 80 per cent were working in graduate-level jobs and were satisfied or fairly satisfied with their career (HECSU 2010b). Furthermore, the graduate premium is calculated at an average of £160,000 gross compared to those educated to A-level (PwC 2010), with lower graduate premiums based on subject studied (such as



for the arts) and specific careers (particularly academia). It is likely that higher education provides significant good outcomes in terms of employability, access to work requiring graduate-level skills and overall career satisfaction.

Future employment prospects are not of course the only reason to attend university. Another important outcome – as identified by students and as acknowledged in university prospectuses and support services – is the ‘university experience’ itself. The *Student Experience* report found that students valued the university experience (cited by 44 per cent as the reason for attending) and said that meeting new friends (59 per cent), learning about their chosen subject (48 per cent) and stretching themselves intellectually were the best aspects of university life (UNITE 2007). Furthermore, it is likely that life skills gained in living independently, as well as professional and personal contacts, are important future benefits of attending university, above and beyond achieved qualifications.

### **Conclusions**

There continue to be significant inequalities in access to higher education, particularly to the most prestigious institutions, for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet, in many cases inequalities in educational attainment have become established long before students attempt to access the higher education system. While universities have made attempts to widen participation, and they appear to select objectively based on A-level results, their efforts cannot correct for ingrained educational inequalities. In these circumstances, university outreach programmes are commendable, but can be characterised as ‘too little, too late’. If we want to tackle inequality in higher education, we must start with the compulsory school system, through directing education policy towards reducing inequalities for schoolchildren from low socioeconomic backgrounds, while sustaining broader policy objectives of reducing systemic inequality of opportunity. Comparatively, problems of inequality with regards to gender and race, for the most part, are being addressed and redressed.

Outcomes necessarily vary based on the employability and opportunities afforded by the course studied but also, importantly, by the HE institution attended. Yet, for the graduate population as a whole, the long-term outcomes of attending higher education appear overwhelmingly favourable. The less favourable short-term outcomes may, however, be an initial cause for concern for recent graduates.

There is limited evidence for improvements in quality of provision or expansion of places as a result of 2011 reforms. However, there is a danger that in the longer term they will deepen access inequalities. Therefore, government direction of targeted financial assistance to universities, as well as information and support systems within schools to help disadvantaged but able pupils, will be necessary to prevent inequalities arising.

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# THE CASE AGAINST A GRADUATE TAX

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It is clear that the high education sector is underfunded and that if the UK is to remain competitive in the global economy ways will have to be found to increase investment in universities. The Coalition government's proposed solution is to increase substantially tuition fees. In this essay, I do not propose to go into the rights and wrongs of this move in any detail (although, in my opinion, incurring a debt of £3,000 is already too much of a burden for many students and fees of £9,000 fees are going to damage the equality of opportunity platform that the last Labour government strived to achieve). Instead, I will concentrate on an alternative to fees proposed by some – a graduate tax.

In my view, a just and sustainable funding mechanism should be underpinned by three principles. First, does it increase the amount of money universities receive, so that they can remain internationally competitive? Second, does it increase the number of British students from all backgrounds able to apply to university? And third, does the funding mechanism offer both a short *and* long-term solution?

If the answer to all of these questions is yes, then the ideal solution has been found. If the answer no, then the funding problems will persist. So how well does a graduate tax perform against these tests?

## **What is a graduate tax?**

Last summer the business, innovations and skills secretary, Vince Cable, proposed replacing tuition fees with a graduate tax, which he said would be a 'progressive' system that would make funding both fairer and more sustainable (BBC News 2010a). But Cable's department abandoned this idea in anticipation of findings of the government-commissioned Browne report, which came out strongly against a graduate tax. However, the idea is supported by Labour leader Ed Miliband. Under his scheme, graduates would be taxed a fixed amount of their salary once they started earning over £25,000. Those earning more would pay more.

According to the University and College Union (UCU), based on such a tax being levied at five per cent, payable over 25 years, professionals at the lower end of the graduate pay scale, such as teachers, would pay around £17,000 more (at today's costs) for their degrees than at present; those at the higher end, such as doctors, would pay over £77,000 more for their studies (Shepherd 2010). This compares to the £28,000 in fees for a three-year course that many universities have opted for following the passing of the Higher Education Bill.

## Does a graduate tax measure up?

Whether a graduate tax meets all of the three fundamental criteria is difficult to assess. The first test is already something of a sticking point. As a tax, the revenue raised would go straight to the Treasury, after which there is no guarantee that all the receipts from the new tax would be spent on higher education. The Treasury would be able to allocate the funds as they saw fit. In fact, having all funding centralised from Whitehall could lead to a loss of institutional autonomy, which at present is what helps keep British universities globally competitive. In 2010/11, around 35 per cent of funding for each student comes from the government, with fees accounting for 29 per cent (BBC News 2010b). Under a graduate tax, the amount coming from the government would double, with the rest coming from other sources, such as research grants, as it does today. Critics have argued that a graduate tax would lead to excessive centralisation, but if the tax was administered by an independent body, outside of Treasury control, this problem could be mitigated.

On the second test, a graduate tax might help to encourage greater access. The average debt for students graduating in 2011 is forecast to be £21,198 (Push 2010). Without the thought of this financial burden, more young people might apply for university, even if they had to pay for their courses later through the taxation system. Tax might be seen in a more positive light than debt.

However, UCU has pointed out that a graduate tax is little more than a 'rebranding' exercise, and the Russell Group have stated that it is 'not fairer' than the current fees set up for this very reason. Australia, a country often cited as having a graduate tax, actually has a similar system to the current British set-up: instead of paying upfront, graduates pay a defined amount once their income reaches a certain threshold (DES 2003). And if one assumes that everyone on the same course receives an equal education, then the justification for saying those who later earn more should pay considerably more for their course is weak on fairness grounds. Despite these misgivings, on balance, the fact that a graduate tax would be less likely to discourage access means it would pass my second test.

The final test for graduate tax is its ability to be both a short and long-term fix. Undoubtedly the amount of money available would increase as graduates' wages increase. Also, more graduates in jobs would mean more tax being paid, so in the long term it would be a viable solution. The obvious problem is its ability to provide sustained funding in the short term. If fees were abolished and a tax introduced, it would take several years for the gap in funding to be filled. And even then, the graduates who are in full-time employment would start out in relatively lower-paid jobs, perhaps not generating the funds required, especially at times of economic uncertainty: the current student unemployment rate, for instance, stands at more than 20 per cent. The need for greater university funding is pressing, while a graduate

tax offers only a longer-term solution, so again on balance it fails the final test.

This means that a graduate tax only scores one out of three against my tests. And in addition there are serious questions over its practicability. Ian Cowie of the *Daily Telegraph* (2010) has said that 'good' taxes are cheap to collect, difficult to avoid and capable of raising large sums of money. He says that a graduate tax would require a new level of bureaucracy, would be easy to avoid by emigrating (the UK government has no powers to compel emigrants to pay tax) and would struggle to raise large sums of money in the short and medium term. On this basis, a graduate tax is a bad tax, and though it might still be alive politically, there is little chance of it being introduced.

### **Another alternative – raising the retirement age for graduates**

Instead of rebranding debt as tax, what other options are open to improve university funding? One is to increase the retirement age for graduates. The money saved in paying pensions later could then be reinvested in higher education. By contrast with a graduate tax, this idea easily passes all three tests, on the surface at least: it would increase funding, it would not detract from the numbers able to apply to university, and it would provide a long-term solution. Indeed, the consensus on this issue is that the raising of the retirement age even above current plans is almost 'inevitable' (BBC News 2010c). Universities minister David Willets told the BBC that distinguishing retirement ages between graduates and non-graduates could make sense, as graduates are likely to lead healthier lives and so are able to work longer (ibid). This is a generalisation, but it shows that the government is receptive to such a scheme. The drawbacks are that the funds generated, although a great benefit, would not be sufficient. Increased funding would still need to come from another source, either in the form of fees or through the said tax.

Furthermore, although Willets points out that separating graduates from non-graduates could make sense logically, is it right? If we live in a country that truly values hard work and equality of opportunity, then the ethical grounds for this idea are a little shaky to say the least. Having encouraged so many young people in recent years to work hard at school so that they can go to the university, on the grounds that a university degree is essential to success in the global jobs market, it might be seen as unfair that these people are then required to work longer than others before being able to retire. University is about allowing people to improve their lives and to better themselves and their prospects. It cannot be right to penalise them by increasing their retirement age just because they want to get on in life.

### **Conclusion**

At first sight, the graduate tax offers students an alternative they are searching for – no debt, no worries over financing their study, no deterrent from studying in the first place. As a solution, however,

the graduate tax falls short in terms of being a logistical and, more importantly, a justified solution.

Other alternatives, such as raising the retirement age for graduates, would generate extra funding and could mean that any increase in fees would not have to be as painful as envisaged, but as a standalone policy it is not enough. What is certain is that a definitive solution to the financial situation of universities is far from close to completion. We know what will not work and we know what *can* work. The challenge now is balancing the interests of students with the needs of universities, while taking account of the economic climate. The instability the British economy faces is a difficulty in this respect. A form of fees-based structure is the only viable option; whether that justifies a threefold increase, however, is more than dubious.

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# NEW IDEAS FOR FUNDING UNIVERSITIES

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With cuts to university funding from central government, British universities must find alternative sources of finance. Despite universities now being able to charge fees up to £9,000 a year, they still face a funding shortfall. Privatisation would allow some universities to remove restrictions on student numbers and fee levels, but this route is only open to a handful of elite universities. British universities are typically well regarded internationally, with many featuring near the top of global league tables. There is, therefore, particular interest in how they might control and cut costs without damaging this 'comparative advantage' in the quality of education, research and the student experience. A serious examination of alternatives to privatisation is necessary.

In this article, I analyse three of the most prominent ideas for change: UK government proposals for two-year degree courses; mergers and partnerships, currently championed by the Welsh government; and flexible learning in the form of part-time, distance and online courses, which is becoming increasingly popular with students. I conclude that two-year degrees will not form part of a solution to university funding issues, while mergers and partnerships will only benefit a limited number of universities. Offering more flexible courses offers all institutions the opportunity to increase student numbers and thereby should form the key element of university funding plans into the future.

## **Two-year degree courses**

Successive UK governments have suggested that universities should start offering two-year honours degrees (Newman 2010, Morgan 2010). The University of Buckingham, Britain's only private university, already specialises in running just such a 'fast-track' degree, offering an equivalent amount of teaching to a traditional three-year degree in only two years, by reducing the length of holiday periods (University of Buckingham, undated). A voluntary audit in 2003 stated 'broad confidence' in the institution (Brennan and Williams 2008: 243).

The Buckingham case demonstrates that it is possible for an intensive two-year degree to cover as much material as a three-year one. However, such degrees require as much expenditure by universities on teaching and administration as three-year courses, and require students to pay fees that are comparable to the longer programmes (Newman 2010). They also give less time for students to reflect on their education (Morgan 2010) or to earn money by undertaking part-time work. Meanwhile, the recently completed 'Bologna process' has set the Europe-wide standard for an undergraduate qualification

at three years, itself a controversial reduction from the four-year qualification which was previously standard in many countries.

The Labour government established two-year foundation degrees with an emphasis on vocational training, similar to the widespread and often profitably run associate's degree in the US (Turner 2006: 59–60). These have grown steadily in popularity, and just under 100,000 students were registered on a foundation degree course in 2009/10 (HEFCE 2010). These courses offer a more affordable, if less comprehensive, higher education for some students, and the possibility of more students studying shorter courses could boost finances, even at less prestigious institutions. But the Coalition government has chosen to focus instead on increasing the number of apprenticeships and Vince Cable talks of 'end[ing] the outdated value distinction between blue-collar apprenticeships and further education on the one hand and university on the other' (Cable 2010: 13) – implying less interest in schemes such as this which attempt to bridge the gap between the two.

Two-year degree courses can deliver as much material as the traditional three-year degree and, as the University of Buckingham programme demonstrates, will be appropriate for some well-funded students. However, they will not cut costs or generate additional income for universities and so do not offer a structural solution to the university funding crisis.

### **Mergers, partnerships and franchises**

The Welsh government has proposed that the existing 11 institutions of higher education in Wales should merge so that by 2013 only six remain (BBC News 2010). Such mergers have been common over the past couple of decades, and usually take the form of either a small institute affiliating to a university, or two similar universities joining together in the hope of achieving economies of scale. The National Union of Students remains concerned that mergers will reduce choice and make access more difficult. With so many universities in existence, mergers are likely to continue, but economies of scale among larger institutions must be limited, and there is little incentive for an elite institution to merge with a less-prestigious rival.

Looser partnerships are already popular, as demonstrated by the burgeoning number of local teaching and research collaborations. However, government proposals for partnerships with industry are problematic, given the move away from foundation degrees. GuildHE, the body representing heads of small higher education institutions and several recently designated universities and university colleges, claims that its members have already been developing courses with local small- and medium-sized enterprises (Baker 2010). But such enterprises can seldom give sufficient financial commitment to developing a degree programme, except as part of an unwieldy consortium (Sanders 2006).



Franchising – the process of universities accrediting courses taught at other institutions – is now an important part of higher education. The most recent HEFCE figures, for 2006/07, show that 71,730 students were being taught at institutions other than those where their course was accredited (HEFCE 2008).<sup>1</sup> GuildHE claim that most of the organisations they represent are already offering courses franchised from more-established universities, but strongly opposes the newer universities acting as local centres awarding the degrees of other universities (Baker 2010). With some government funding remaining for science, technology, engineering and maths (the STEM subjects), we could instead see stratification and the reinvention of the polytechnic, as those newer universities with strengths in science, technology and engineering refocus on fields where they hold a comparative advantage.

So many institutions already have the right to issue their own degrees that the scope to extend franchising within the UK must be limited. The franchising of courses to overseas institutions, particularly in the developing world, has already been aggressively pursued by some US and UK universities (Ross 2009: 18). As countries such as China and India prosper, some universities may be able to profit from a continued expansion, but these markets are highly competitive, and new entrants without established reputations are bound to struggle. Further savings might be possible by outsourcing administration and some teaching (ibid: 29), but such moves would lead to job losses and would threaten local support and claims for state backing in the event of serious financial difficulties.

In summary, the consolidation of less prestigious institutions by further mergers is set to continue, but increased economies of scale are only likely to benefit smaller institutions. Partnerships with industry can benefit all involved, but there are only a limited number of companies large enough to individually partner with universities, while the construction of consortia is time-consuming and therefore less profitable. Finally, franchising of courses will remain more important to institutions which have already entered the market outside the UK, while new entrants will struggle to gain a foothold. In short, this group of potential solutions will prove important for some institutions, but it does offer a universal panacea for the problems facing the sector.

### **Flexible learning**

The creation of the Open University in 1969 was a landmark moment in distance learning, and it is often cited as the first major success in remote higher education, offering high-quality courses (Miller 2000). The distance-learning model has been taken up in the US by a number of highly profitable organisations, most prominently the University of Phoenix, and such models can be particularly popular with people who do not have time to study on a full-time basis (Collins and Halverson 2010).

There is now also increased demand for online learning by full-time campus-based students who need to take paid employment to pay their fees and who therefore find it difficult to attend a full programme of lectures scheduled throughout the week (Garrison and Kanuka 2008: 15). British universities have not been slow to examine the possibilities of online programmes and to deliver some course material online. One driver for this has always been a desire to cut costs (ibid: 15–16, 20). This trend is likely to continue, but online learning is a clearly different (and arguably, diminished) experience to attendance in person. The Open University traditionally offset this problem with local tutorials and summer schools. Although the cost of developing high-quality online courses should not be underestimated, these can boost university funds – indeed, the University of Leicester is able to charge more for its online masters degrees than many institutions do for in-person teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Higher fees for students are likely to increase demand for part-time study, as has been seen in the US. British university courses are seldom designed to permit switching between full and part-time study, or for students to drop out for a period and then to return to study at the point where they left off (Scherer 2010). More opportunities for part-time study could be combined with two-year diplomas or degrees and distance learning to satisfy the desire for more flexibility in the routes through higher education. As widely seen in the US, this is deliverable, and may increase the affordability of courses and thus the total number of students. Still more affordable courses could be delivered on the US model, allowing variable numbers of credits to be taken each year, and making it easier to take breaks in study. Already, HESA figures for 2008/09 show that 69.8 per cent of home postgraduate taught students were studying on a part-time basis, although figures for postgraduate research students (38.3 per cent) and undergraduates (33.4 per cent) remain far lower (HESA 2010).<sup>3</sup> In the light of these developments, there must be caution in regarding a traditional degree, completed in three years, as a ‘gold standard’, given that in future it may only be accessible to the best-funded students.

In the past, crises in higher education have often prompted widespread and radical thinking about the future of higher education. The student revolts of the late 1960s initially revolved around demands for the democratisation of university governance and, in particular, self-governance by students (Katsiaficas 1987: 53). In France, the movement of May 1968 questioned the entire organisation of university education (ibid: 90–91). By the Berkeley strike of 1970, an ideal emerged of decision-making by the whole local community about the role of the university and its curriculum (ibid: 127–131). The

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2 For example, an MA in international relations by distance learning at the University of Leicester cost £5,880 for the academic year 2010/11. An MA in the same subject at the University of Sheffield was £3,860 for the same academic year.

3 From Table C: 69,855 female and 51,990 male home postgraduate taught students studied on a part-time basis, out of 174,520 total. Figures for postgraduate research and undergraduate students are compiled from the same table.

Edu-factory Collective (2009), which claims to have a background in worldwide opposition to the marketisation of higher education, proposes participatory, peer-led education at an unrecognised, informal university. While such a proposal would fail to deliver the certification desired by so many students, the presentation of peer-led learning in a more positive manner may represent a way forward for universities struggling with their finances.

We can expect to see more institutions emphasise flexible study options, and there is potential to deliver this in a manner beneficial to all actors. For the majority of institutions, this is closest thing to a structural solution to their financial concerns, although as the fields of online and distance learning become more competitive, the profit margins will decrease. Universities must be sure to involve students, staff and wider communities in the future not only of individual courses, but their entire curricula in order to retain their active support. Bold proposals arising from groups resisting cuts to higher education, such as peer-led learning, should also be considered. By doing so, institutions can offer desirable, high-quality programmes with a positive student experience at a lower annual cost to attendees.

### Conclusions

Of the many ideas put forward for potential structural change to university education in the UK, few have genuine potential to ameliorate the emerging crisis. British universities have already begun to take advantage of the most promising proposals, such as franchising courses and online delivery. More flexibility, in the form of multi-speed study with permitted breaks, could make courses affordable for more students and should be a focus for newer universities. Two-year degrees suit some well-financed students, but only foundation degrees have the potential to form part of this flexible learning structural solution. Franchising and partnerships could be expanded, but will only benefit a minority of institutions. Mergers and stratification are likely, but should be the first-choice strategy only for some small institutions. Ultimately, the potential of resistance movements to generate genuinely new ideas remains untapped. Rather than supinely accept government cuts, university leaders would be well-advised to engage staff and students involved in building positive challenges to them, and look for new ideas to add to the promising proposals for peer-led learning. To do otherwise will condemn universities outside the small elite to focus on a much narrower curriculum or to accept mediocrity and even possible bankruptcy.

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# HIGHER EDUCATION AND ACCESS FOR ALL

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FUNDING DEBATE

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This article argues that social inequality in contemporary Britain is too vast to make the abolition of tuition fees desirable – wider problems of disadvantage must be tackled first. In addition, the abolition of fees is not feasible with the current university system and financial infrastructure, and would only be so with a vast increase in taxation hand-in-hand with reduced attendance numbers and squeezed university spending. The most feasible and desirable answer is both increased use of income contingent loans and grants alongside differential fees. This is the most progressive option because it would still allow wider participation but also mean that those benefitting most – rather than society at large – would contribute the most.

### **The fee-free dream**

The publication of the Browne report has sent the UK into turmoil over the financing of higher education, with many arguing for the abolition of tuition fees. But is this possible, and if so, is it a desirable aim? It seems that at present (as the government is so keen to make clear) the abolition of fees is unrealistic: the inflated number of students attending, and maintaining internationally high standards, cannot be financed by the taxpayer alone. However, just because in this economic climate the government may cry ‘there is no alternative’, this is not to say it would never be possible to provide free higher education. Looking at systems such as the Swedish model, it would be feasible at some point in the future to introduce higher taxation in order to finance universities as public bodies.

The main question, then, is whether this is a desirable goal. This article argues that a completely state-funded higher education system would in fact be more regressive than income contingent loans, with wider society financing the education of a primarily middle class sector of society. Between 1980 and 2001, despite there being no tuition fee and a vast increase in the number of students attending, the proportion of undergraduates from disadvantaged backgrounds barely changed (Greenaway and Haynes 2003: 155). So it appears the abolition of fees would not widen participation, because the lack of accessibility is in fact a symptom of a far wider problem: inequality. At the same time, it has been argued (by those such as the National Union of Students) that an entirely free-market approach to higher education would be simply wrong. They contend that the government has a duty, and it is in their interest, to play a role in higher education ensuring that it provides the fairest admissions and the best service possible (NUS undated A). Requiring fully fee-paid courses would limit accessibility and options, widening existing inequalities.

The middle ground, which has been so badly neglected in recent debates, would offer a combination of increased income contingent loans and grants as well as differential fees. This compromise is the most feasible choice, and would offer the best of both the free-market option – allowing academic standards to rise and the end of a unitary fee – along with the best of a free service, widening participation by funding the poorest students. This presents the most progressive solution, ensuring those who are the best-off pay the most and, more importantly, offering a free education to those who might otherwise be deterred by cost.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that free higher education is not ultimately a worthwhile goal, merely that social inequality is so vast that at present it is undesirable. Perhaps in an egalitarian system, where all paths in life were promoted and given the same value, and social exclusion eradicated, the abolition of fees and the public financing of the top minds in the country would be desirable – but for now, alas, this is mere utopia.

### **Handling fees**

Pragmatically, there are a number of immediate obstacles to the abolition of tuition fees, as have been promoted by the government. The most obvious is the cost to the public finances: since 1980, when just 13 per cent of people attended university, figures have more than doubled, while public funding per student has halved (Greenaway and Haynes 2003: 152–153). There is therefore a significant spending gap which needs filling – to suggest the public sector could finance this is, in the present economic situation, a little farfetched. Or as the Browne report put it: ‘The current funding and finance systems ... are unsustainable and need urgent reform’ (Browne 2010: 8). At a point where funding levels have fallen so dramatically, with the UK spending one of the lowest amounts as a percentage of GDP of all OECD countries, one could argue it seems ludicrous to suggest they could now fully fund the vast numbers attending university.

Nonetheless, just because this abolition of fees seems hard to envisage now, it is not to say it could not exist in a reformed system. This could happen via a number of routes: a cut in applicants, a decline in costs, increased taxation to fill the gap, or indeed a combination of all three. The first two seem the least feasible – in particular, a decrease in university spending by squeezing budgets alone would be almost impossible. Cutting numbers attending is more practicable, but also difficult without reform of the examination and admissions system. Higher taxation therefore would be the more feasible answer, alongside the other two, as happens efficiently in Sweden (*ibid*: 17). Hence, it would not be entirely impossible to produce a ‘free’ tertiary education system in the long term, but this would be pragmatically fraught, and in the short term is nigh on impossible.

Furthermore, we must also consider the ideological arguments for the abolition of fees, as pragmatic reasons alone are never a good basis

to abandon policy ideas. Firstly, whether we deem this a desirable goal depends entirely on what we believe to be the aims of politics: is it merely to keep expanding the country's finances and maintain our place in the world order, or is it to try and improve the quality of lives of our citizens? Our idea of progress in the west has been fundamentally shaped by the former; however, it seems that the latter is a far more worthwhile and progressive pursuit.

The new economics of wellbeing, as promoted by those such as Richard Layard (2005), argues that the 'Easterlin Paradox' shows that above a certain level of GDP western nations are failing to improve the wellbeing of their citizens. As Robert Constanza et al (2009: 10) have argued, 'GDP's emphasis on quantity encourages depletion of social and natural capital and other policies that undermine quality of life for future generations'. Therefore, the only appropriate way in which to judge the funding of higher education is whether it will continue to increase a greater sense of societal wellbeing, social inclusion and relieve inequality. This refutes both the self-interested cries of a privileged section of society for free education and the economically driven approach of an entirely free market in which students, as consumers, may be manipulated.

A wholly state-funded higher education system, as previously mentioned, would be more regressive than would be the case by including some form of personal contribution. How can we justify taxation of some of the poorest members of society to fund the education of some of the most privileged? UCAS figures show that, despite vast increases in numbers attending university, the share of students from low-income backgrounds has barely changed between 1980 and 2001 (Greenaway and Haynes 2003: 155). As Greenaway and Haynes write, this suggests 'widening access has much more to do with differential secondary school performance, than university admissions procedures' (ibid: 156). This is further supported by the true demographic makeup of the sixties and seventies generation of graduates. As the *Economist* points out:

**'In reality ... that golden age was never quite as wonderful ... The justification of offering free higher education is that nobody should be denied it on cost grounds. But in practice the children of the privileged have long been much more likely to get into university than the children of the poor. The result was perverse: in the name of equality, all taxpayers were forced to subsidise the privileged.'**

(*Economist* 2005)

In addition, it has been argued that the benefits to wider society are so great that it is desirable that higher education is state-funded. However, despite evidence showing there are benefits to wider society, it also shows the individual benefits are much higher. Hence, Greenaway and Haynes argue that the key beneficiaries of the system

must make a contribution towards this privilege (Greenaway and Haynes 2003: 156–158).

Further to this are arguments that higher education is a right, and it is government's duty to provide it. Yet, the concept of a right is that it is applicable to everyone, as outlined in Rawls' first principle of justice: 'Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others' (Rawls 1999: 53). Being intelligent enough to attend university is in itself a privilege and is not something every person can do – why should that sector of society deserve greater investment than the rest, when the personal gain is so high? Higher education is a privilege, not a right, and so should not be provided solely by the taxpayer.

Moreover, even if we did manage to widen participation and recruit the most talented people regardless of background, this is not to say they will all benefit equally from their degrees, and hence do not deserve to pay a unitary amount. As was argued by business secretary Vince Cable, 'it can't be fair that a teacher or care worker ... is expected to pay the same graduate contribution as a top commercial lawyer or ... City analyst whose graduate premium is so much bigger' (NUS undated). It is not progressive to give people who will end up with such different earnings higher education for the same sum (in this case, nothing). This leads us away from universal free higher education to some form of differential fees, with those who become the most privileged paying the most.

Simultaneously, arguments for an entirely unregulated higher education market to compete internationally and boost economic growth are defunct; blindly increasing GDP is no longer allowing society to progress, instead we must consider the overall quality of lives lived. A wholly fee-based system would be regressive, only serving to build on existing inequalities. Evidence shows that a free market of fees would deter those from poorer households applying to the top universities (Greenaway and Haynes 2003: 156). Instead of choosing based solely on merit, applicants would consider the cost of the degree, leading to increased disparity between universities. Despite arguments that it would force universities to be more efficient and so drive down prices, evidence points to the contrary, as can be seen in the US. Applicants tend to associate price with quality and hence the top institutions increase prices, while those at the bottom are forced to decrease theirs in order to fill spaces. This would lead to a two-tiered system and further hinder social mobility (NUS undated B).

Not only would a wholly free-market approach frame the service in commercial and individualistic terms, but markets often fail. Students as consumers would have far from perfect information or means to freely choose a course in their best interest, universities may cut corners in order to sell degrees, and it may lead to the erosion of the intellectual commons. Such a system is too unreliable to be used to determine the future social and cultural quality of society. The wider societal positives of higher education – social, cultural and economic



– have been proven many times. In particular, Bynner and Egerton (2000) have found links between higher education and participation in voluntary work, civic life, democratic processes and tolerant attitudes, all of which promotes social cohesion. Therefore, the government has a duty both to play a role and to invest in higher education.

### Conclusion

The abolition of tuition fees in the UK is not feasible in the foreseeable future, but would be possible under an overhaul of the financial infrastructure. Ideologically, the abolition of fees is undesirable under the current social system, but so too would be a completely free-market strategy. It seems the most feasible and desirable answer is a compromise: a regulated market, with government investing a significant amount in the future of its citizens via income contingent loans and a higher profile scholarship scheme, hand-in-hand with contributions from the privileged section of society via differential fees. This cost sharing has been promoted by many scholars, such as Bruce Johnstone, who wonders, 'why a trend so seemingly ascendant, rational, and even necessary is still so controversial' (2004: 403). Via these two methods, those who will become some of the wealthiest in society would contribute at a fair rate, according to the quality of their course, but at the same time wider access could be promoted.

These measures alone are however only short-term solutions. What is most desirable is that governments continue to fight social exclusion in the widest sense possible, in order to increase mobility at the university admissions stage. As Greenaway and Haynes write, 'policies targeted at long term improvements in family environment will be much more successful than short run policies aimed at tuition reduction' (2003: 164). The long-term goal of any society should be equality of opportunity, and it is only when such an egalitarian system is established that free higher education could be deemed desirable. To abolish fees now would just fuel the expansion of the middle classes at the expense of the most socially excluded in society – they must be targeted first.

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