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Social Market Foundation

ROBBINS REVISITED

Bigger and Better Higher Education

The Rt Hon. David Willetts MP

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FOREWORD

It is a special pleasure for me to welcome this pamphlet. I do so as one of the few survivors of the team that produced the Robbins report fifty years ago. I think it is splendid that David Willetts should take such an interest in the report and its legacy. Lionel Robbins would have been very pleased.

All of us, not least Lord Robbins himself, would have been surprised then to see the impact that our report would have. Its effects are felt even today.

One of its great strengths was that it was so firmly evidence-based. In our very first meeting, Lord Robbins insisted we wouldn't recommend anything that couldn't be backed by evidence.

Many of the key features of the report come out clearly in these pages. There was the key issue of expanding student numbers, which was really the main reason why the committee was appointed. It is hard now to believe that at that time only around five per cent of young people entered university. That subject dominated much of our discussions, and our recommendations indeed led to the dramatic transformation of our higher education system.

But there was also much more to the report and its legacy. The stress on teaching was, as this pamphlet describes, typical of Lord Robbins' thinking. If you look at the style of language he uses when talking about it, including quotations from Ancient Greeks, his passion for teaching shines through.

Robbins changed the whole tone of public discussion on higher education. Until then, universities had really been a non-subject. Politicians talked about schools, and perhaps sometimes further education colleges, but suddenly this report brought higher

education into the debate. I myself gave 60 speeches and lectures around the country in the 18 months following its publication, such was the strength of interest.

Although we are 50 years on, David Willetts sees a number of issues on which the Robbins report provides important lessons for us today. I was particularly pleased to note the way he sets out Robbins' basic principles and ideals of higher education.

Like everything in the report, these ideals reflected the views of Lord Robbins himself. He was a wonderful man, and a superb chairman.

Lord Moser
Statistical Adviser to the Robbins committee

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THE RT HON. DAVID WILLETTS MP

The Rt Hon. David Willetts MP is a British Conservative Party politician and the Minister for Universities and Science. He has been MP for Havant since 1992 and previously worked at HM Treasury and the Number 10 Policy Unit. He served as Paymaster General in the last Conservative Government. Willetts has written widely on economic and social policy. His book *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give It Back* was published in 2010.

CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEXT

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

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

A fraught process ensued to choose the new Conservative Party Leader and therefore Prime Minister. On 19 October, having seen off the other challengers – including RA Butler, the architect of the post-1944 school system – the peer Alec Douglas-Home took charge. Less than a week later, on 23 October, his new Government formally received the Robbins report, entitled *Higher Education*.

A day later, the new administration accepted Lord Robbins's conclusions in full. This was widely expected. (The previous year's Conservative Party Conference had called on the Government "to invest in the future by a rapid and massive development of university and higher technological education".[1]) Nevertheless, it was still an epochal moment. According to John Carswell, who held many of the leading administrative posts in higher education policy during his long career, "Only the Beveridge Report … and the Poor

1 Quoted in Peter Gosden, *The Education System since 1944*, 1983, 151.

Law Report of 1909 can compete with it for copiousness, cogency, coherence and historical influence."[2] In contrast to many other official reports, the impact did not quickly diminish. The report set the course of British higher education for decades to come.

Nonetheless, the Robbins report's true influence is often misunderstood or even exaggerated. What is traditionally regarded as the Robbins agenda – mass expansion of higher education – was already well under way by the time the Robbins committee concluded their work. Three features of a national system of mass higher education were rolled out while the Robbins committee were deliberating between 1961 and 1963. These were: a national student support system; the beginnings of a national university application system; and the foundation of wholly new universities. We will now examine each of these in turn.

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

Local authorities treated similar students differently. These variations were hard to justify. The number of county scholars for

2 John Carswell, *Government and the Universities in Britain*, 1985, 38.

3 Ministry of Education, *Grants to Students*, HMSO, 1960, 13.

every 10,000 people varied from under two in Leeds to over twenty in Cardiganshire in the early 1950s, and the average award ranged from £96 in Bury to £276 in Gloucester.[4] Such large differences could not be explained solely by the characteristics of the local population. In 1960, after two years' work, an official committee led by Sir Colin Anderson recommended a new system: British residents with two A-Level passes (or equivalent) admitted to first-degree (or comparable) courses should receive generous awards for maintenance and tuition that were consistent across the country.[5]

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

The change from the old discretionary system to a standardised and more generous one improved access to university but it also improved the lot of students, who could make more of the opportunities on offer. Between the wars, students typically had to scrape around for funding from a number of different sources. One study identified "the sheer chanciness of the circumstances that allowed many of those in my sample to embark on a university

4 Hansard, 26 July 1954, cols 127-128.

5 Nicholas Hillman, 'From Grants for All to Loans for All: Undergraduate Finance from the Implementation of the Anderson Report (1962) to the Implementation of the Browne Report (2012)', *Contemporary British History*, 27:3, 2013, 249-270.

education."[6] Jenny Lee, the architect of the Open University, attended Edinburgh University through a combination of support from her local authority, the Carnegie Trust and her parents (who even risked a shilling each way on the Derby to try and help). Her clothes were bought on credit and she was forced to shun student accommodation for the cheaper alternative of renting a room.[7] Things improved considerably after the war, not least because of the expectations (voluntary not mandatory) that were put on local authorities in the Education Act (1944). But there had still been no certainty of support, nor of its adequacy. In contrast, after 1962, as Robert Anderson has written, "for a whole generation financial problems became a minor concern of university life".[8]

University applications were put on a national basis for the first time alongside the changes to student support. The Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) was created in 1961. Historically, there had been little need for a centralised admissions service because supply and demand for university were fairly evenly matched. Although each individual could apply directly to as many institutions as they liked, multiple applications were rare before the Second World War. But increasing competition for places increased the number of applicants making multiple entries. This became unmanageable for applicants and institutions: as one Vice Chancellor complained in 1957, "no one interested in the selection of students could pretend that the present situation was other than one of deplorable chaos."[9]

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

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

7 Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History*, 2012, 3.

8 Robert Anderson, *British Universities*, 2006, 139.

9 Sir James Mountford as paraphrased in Ronald Kay, *UCCA: Its Origins and Development 1950-85*, 1985, 12.

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

The scheme took effect properly for entry in 1964. Membership by universities was voluntary but even Oxford and Cambridge, which had initially stood aloof, joined for the 1966 entry round onwards. By 1968, UCCA was handling 600,000 applications from 110,000 candidates for 80 institutions. Today, its successor the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) handles 2,600,000 applications from 650,000 candidates for 310 institutions. (This includes 550,000 UK applicants and 141 UK universities.)

Meanwhile, the sector was growing. The University Grants Committee (UGC), the ancestor of today's higher education funding councils, debated the merits and consequences of university expansion in detail long before Robbins. At the start of the 1960s, the UGC agreed around 170,000 university places would be necessary by the early 1970s. Although this was a lower figure than the Robbins committee later came up with, it was sufficient to focus minds. Because existing universities were not keen to deliver all the extra places, there was an unprecedented opportunity to bring some embryonic ideas to life. New universities were established in Sussex (1961), East Anglia (1963), York (1963), Lancaster (1964), Essex (1964), Kent (1965) and Warwick (1965). Keele University was founded in 1962, though its origins owe more to an academic debate about modern forms of higher education than to the numbers game.

10 Ronald Kay, *UCCA: Its Origins and Development 1950-85*, 1985, 5.

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

Prior to the 1960s, civic universities recruited their students locally, students applied somewhat haphazardly to a host of institutions and it was very hard to realise local demand for a new university. That was changing even before Robbins picked up his pen. Without the concurrent decisions of the Macmillan Government to implement a national grant system and of universities to institute a proper national admissions system, the UK could have gone down the Continental route of local higher education, with grants determined by local authorities and with universities exclusively serving their local communities. Instead, what developed was a national sector of autonomous universities with countrywide recruitment patterns and national student support rules: you could apply for full-time undergraduate study relatively easily anywhere in the country, with a generous LEA grant in tow. National government set the terms of the financial support and local government paid it out, but universities had autonomy over who studied where, and so in practice determined who received the support. It was a crucial divergence from the localist and regionalist models common in many countries, including the United States, France and Germany. England remains an outlier compared to its European neighbours in this and other respects.

Although the university world was changing fast, there were still unresolved questions. Two in particular stood out. First, there was little accountability for a sector that was receiving

11 Michael Shattock, *Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945-2011*, 2012, 43.

ever greater sums of public money and which was made up of individual institutions that received an unprecedented proportion of their income from the state. HM Treasury had responsibility for universities within Government. The funding was distributed via the UGC. This was a structure designed to protect institutional autonomy. Yet, as a Treasury official told an early meeting of the Robbins committee, "The Chancellor was put in an invidious position – given the present scale of expenditure – when he had to go beyond his normal role of arbiter to become advocate for one particular item of expenditure."[12]

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2: THE REPORT AND THE VALUE OF LEARNING

The terms of reference for the Robbins report were:

> *to review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty's Government on what principles its long-term development should be based. In particular, to advise, in the light of these principles, whether there should be any changes in that pattern, whether any new types of institution are desirable and whether any modifications should be made in the present arrangements for planning and co-ordinating the development of the various types of institution.*[13]

Robbins begins by setting out four aims of higher education. First, because it is too often undervalued, is "instruction in skills". As the debate about the utility of higher education still rumbles on, it is worth quoting Robbins fully. He says:

> *Confucius said in the Analects that it was not easy to find a man who had studied for three years without aiming at pay. We deceive ourselves if we claim that more than a small fraction of students in institutions of higher education would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read; and it is a mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this.*[14]

Secondly, what is taught should be taught in such a way as to "promote the general powers of the mind" and should operate on a "plane of generality". This is the classic argument that what differentiates higher education is the nature and rigour of the study.

13 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 1.

14 Ibid., 6.

His third principle is "the advancement of learning". This is research. It need not only happen in universities but "the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes of the nature of discovery."[15]

The fourth aim is that university should promote "a common culture and common standards of citizenship". His report came soon after CP Snow had warned of the two cultures, and had met a ferocious riposte from FR Leavis. Robbins believed CP Snow was right to warn of two cultures. Robbins later wrote that this was "due, not to some unavoidable tendency in advanced cultures practising division of intellectual labour, but rather by that practice unaccompanied by corrective educational influences at an appropriate stage."[16] This confident argument for a common culture influences his belief in broad undergraduate study, an issue we will investigate in chapter five.

Robbins then goes on to set out some key principles. His first principle is one that we now think of as the Robbins Principle – that "courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so."[17] This was the basis for the further expansion which we shall consider in chapter three.

He is also wary of the "freezing of institutions into established hierarchies".[18] However he recognises that institutions will have distinctive characteristics and goes on to urge the opportunities for transfer between them. This is very much the model which California was adopting at the time, shaped by Clark Kerr who was a kind of American Robbins. However the distinctive roles of different types of higher education institution is enforced in California by

15 Ibid., 7.

16 Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education Revisited*, 1980, 15.

17 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 8.

18 Ibid., 9.

the Board of Regents which stands above individual institutions and determines their role. Separate roles were enforced in Britain by the incoming Labour Government creating polytechnics – the so-called binary divide which Robbins subsequently denounced and which was finally abolished by the Conservative Government in 1992.

In the next four chapters we will investigate in turn four crucial themes of the Robbins report. First, in chapter three we will consider what the Robbins principle meant for the growth of higher education. In chapter four we will consider his emphasis on the importance of teaching and in chapter five the breadth of subjects he expected people to study. In chapter six we will look at how he thought higher education should be paid for. Then in chapter seven we will consider his ideas on the machinery of government which he had specifically been asked to consider and where he argued that university policy should come within a department of state separate from schools.

Here, we shall consider the benefits of learning because, then as now, that is the basis on which everything else must rest. Robbins achieved a perfect equipoise between utilitarian arguments and confident appeals to underlying value. He is well aware of the utility of higher education, writing: "we wish to state unequivocally that – always provided that the training is suitable – there is a broad connection between the size of the stock of trained manpower in a community and its level of productivity per head."[19]

At the same time, the Robbins report exudes a confidence in the broad value of higher education. He is in no doubt that study at this level is inherently worthwhile – a belief which remains true today whether the subject is history or particle physics. He sees

19 Ibid., 73.

higher education as part of a wider education for citizenship. This is also as true today as it was then.

At the time of the Robbins report, these points lacked a clear evidence base. There was a general assumption that the future private returns of university study, once expansion had occurred, were impossible to calculate: "There are some who think that … returns will plunge pretty steeply. Others take the view that this is unlikely. The fact is that no one knows."[20] Otto Clarke, the senior Treasury official on public spending at the time, captured the Treasury's uncertainty about what the graduates would do: "many of them will finish up as bank clerks – and why not graduate bank clerks?"[21] There was more certainty over the benefits to society, even though these were notably imprecise: "The immeasurable element in the return on suitable investment in higher education is positive."[22]

Today, there is much more evidence available, and it proves Robbins right. Sophisticated economic modelling shows a consistent picture on the economic returns compared to Robbins's complete uncertainty. The expansion in higher education has had little impact on the considerable positive graduate earnings premium, which today stands at comfortably over £100,000 (according to the latest study, £168,000 for men and £252,000 for women). The benefits to the Exchequer are also substantial – the net lifetime benefit to the public finances of a man choosing to go to university is around £260,000 and for a woman around £315,000.[23] Other new research shows the contribution of graduates to the nation's wealth: around 20 per cent of the UK's economic growth between 1982 and 2005 resulted from the increase in graduate-level skills. Once indirect benefits are taken into account using

20 Ibid., 205.

21 Quoted in John Carswell, *Government and the Universities in Britain*, 1985, 51.

22 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 206.

23 Ian Walker and Yu Zhu, *The Impact of university degrees on the lifecycle of earnings*, 2013.

econometric analysis, a one per cent increase in the share of the workforce with a university degree raises long-run productivity by between 0.2 per cent and 0.5 per cent, which implies that at least one-third of the increase in UK labour productivity between 1994 and 2005 was due to the growing number of people with a university degree.[24] Remarkably, the demand for graduates has kept broadly in line with the supply of graduates, and individuals and the economy have both benefited financially as a result. There is no reason to think this will change, despite the echoes of Kingsley Amis ("More will mean worse") in some contemporary commentary.

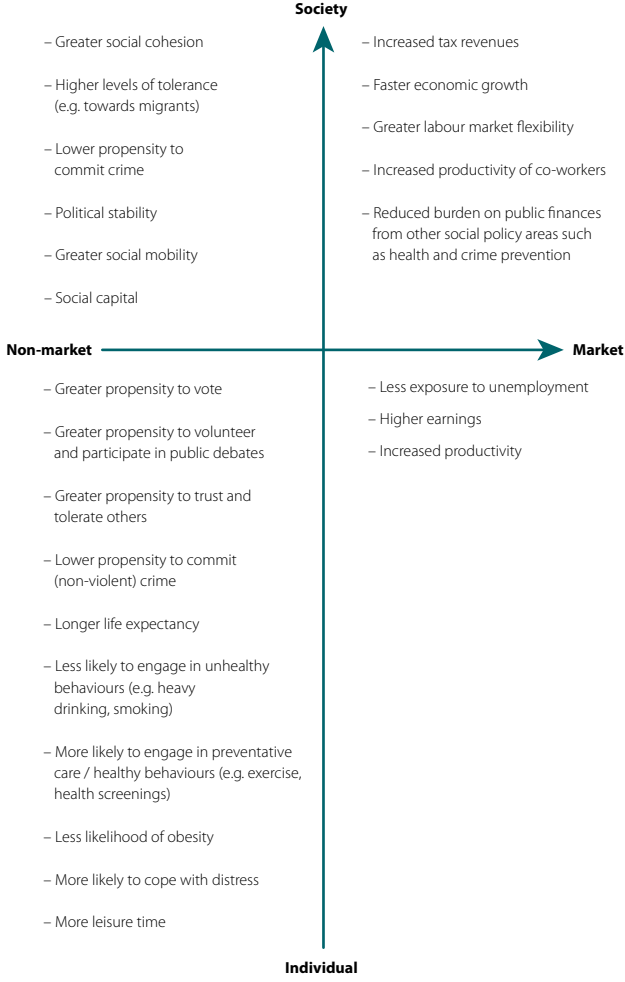
There is scope for further work in this whole area, particular at a more granular level. Professor Neil Shephard of Harvard University and Professor Anna Vignoles of Cambridge University are currently merging a wealth of data from the Student Loans Company and HM Revenue and Customs which should deliver a significant improvement in the current data on labour market outcomes of similar courses at different institutions.

There is of course more to education than financial benefits. New evidence is also available on the non-monetary benefits of higher education. These are no longer "immeasurable", even if "in some places the evidence gaps appear to be much more substantial than the evidence itself".[25] A new review of the evidence by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills shows graduates are more likely to vote, more likely to be members of a voluntary organisation, more tolerant, less likely to suffer depression, less likely to drink alcohol excessively, less likely to smoke, less susceptible to criminal activity and more likely to live longer. These correlations hold up across the developed world. The figure below summarises the proven wider benefits.

24 Dawn Holland, Iana Liadze, Cinzia Rienzo and David Wilkinson, *The relationship between graduates and economic growth across countries*, 2013.

25 Business, Innovation and Skills, *Things we know and don't know about the Wider Benefits of Higher Education: A review of the recent literature*, 2013, 4-5.

Figure 2.1. Benefits associated with HE participation



Source: John Brennan, Niccolo Durazzi and Tanguy Séné, *Things we know and don't know about the Wider Benefits of Higher Education*, forthcoming

The Robbins report itself brought together the utilitarian and non-utilitarian arguments for an educated society in an image that brought the arguments to life, while also reflecting the Cold War environment which overshadowed the committee's work:

> *If a series of nuclear explosions were to wipe out the material equipment of the world but the educated citizens survived, it need not be long before former standards were reconstituted; but if it destroyed the educated citizens, even though it left the buildings and machines intact, a period longer than the Dark Ages might elapse before the former position was restored.*[26]

That is a powerful argument as true now as it was then.

The 1960s saw a series of ambitious educational reports. The Robbins report is the only one that has stood the test of time. The Newsom report on the less able half of young people, *Half Our Future*, which came out just before the Robbins report was overshadowed by it and suffered from the historic lack of interest from the media in vocational study. The progressive recommendations in the 1967 Plowden report, *Children and their Primary Schools*, went out of fashion. The 1968 *First Report* by the Public Schools Commission, which proposed integrating leading independent boarding schools into the state education system, was not taken seriously on either side of the political spectrum.[27] In contrast, although there have been various twists and turns in the half century since (including the temporary establishment of the binary system), today's English university sector is clearly recognisable as the one Robbins devised, with one mass university system populated by autonomous institutions that remain beyond the purview of the Education Department.

Anthony Part of the Ministry of Education wrote presciently to Lionel Robbins on 10 October 1963: "Whatever may happen you will always be an internationally famous figure in British educational history, and generations to come will have continuing cause to be grateful to you."[28]

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26 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 205.

27 Nicholas Hillman, 'The Public Schools Commission: "Impractical, Expensive and Harmful to Children"?', *Contemporary British History*, 24:4, 2010, 511-531.

28 Quoted in Susan Howson, *Lionel Robbins*, 2011, 890.

CHAPTER 3: THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION

When the Robbins report was published in 1963 there were nearly 216,000 full-time students in higher education (including 130,000 at university). Robbins projected this number would grow to 558,000 by 1980-81 (including 346,000 in universities). His bold prescription for expansion is what his report is best known for. And it rested on his guiding principle – as important now as it was then – that higher education should be open to all those qualified by attainment and ability who wish to go.

When the committee began their deliberations, they were faced with the key problem of estimating the number of places that might be needed in the future. The report notes that they considered two possible approaches. The first, which they defined as "manpower planning", involved the consideration of "what supply of different kinds of highly educated persons will be required to meet the needs of the nation".[29] Such an approach would involve making calculations – or to put it less charitably, guesses – about the future structure of British industry and the sorts of skills companies might need in the future.

Conventional manpower forecasting of this sort bedevils many discussions of education and skills. Lord Moser, the statistician to the Committee, recalls that there was a heated debate about this method, with the Committee divided. However, Robbins himself was resolute. He was a distinguished free market economist who just did not believe such forecasts were credible. And he won. The report states that the committee agreed that the manpower planning approach was "impracticable".[30] While it would be possible, for certain professions and over a short term to make relatively robust calculations about what recruitment needs will be,

29 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 48.

30 Ibid., 48.

the Committee found "no reliable basis for reckoning the totality of such needs over a long term."[31]

Instead they opted to look at the problem from the opposite end – considering what the demand was likely to be from suitably qualified young people over the next twenty years. They focussed on the number of young people qualified to go to university, not spurious economic forecasts of future jobs. This is a far better approach. It puts the individual centre stage. And it recognizes that the flow of graduates can itself change the structure of an economy. It still seems fresh and radical today. The report is clear: "We express our deep conviction that any future estimates of need should proceed from our own basic principle that all who are qualified to pursue full-time higher education should have the opportunity of doing so."[32]

This student demand model meant they had to assess two crucial factors – demographic trends and educational trends. The demographic trend was clear. The tidal wave from the post-war baby boom was about to surge through higher education. A million babies had been born in 1947, compared with an inter-war low of around 600,000. The challenge of educating these surging numbers was a hot political topic. Expansion of higher education was as urgent and imperative as the need to build houses and schools in the 1950s. But superimposed on this was a second educational trend. Robbins saw himself as in many ways the true successor to Butler's school reforms embodied in the 1944 Education Act. More young people were staying on at school to age 15, 16 and beyond. More were getting the qualifications which would give them a claim to a place at university. The expansion of schools was having an "impact on the demand for higher education."[33]

31 Ibid., 48.

32 Ibid., 70.

33 Ibid., 12.

The combination of the increase in the number of young people and the increase in the proportion getting qualifications making them eligible for higher education drove a big cumulative increase in his forecast demand for university places. Robbins took two passes at A-level as the core requirement, as had the earlier 1960 Anderson report on student finance.

Table 3.1. Students in full-time higher education, 1900–01 to 2010–11[34]

	Universities	Other institutions	All full-time higher education
Pre-Robbins time series			
1900–01	20,000	5,000	25,000
1924–25	42,000	19,000	61,000
1938–39	50,000	19,000	69,000
1954–55	82,000	40,000	122,000
1962–63	**118,000**	**98,000**	**216,000**
Post-Robbins time series			
1970–71	235,000	221,000	457,000
1980–81	**307,000**	**228,000**	**535,000**
1990–91	370,000	377,000	747,000
2000–01	1,210,000	77,000	1,286,000
2010–11	1,677,000	62,000	1,739,000
Robbins projections			
1980–81	**346,000**	**212,000**	**558,000**
difference from actuals	39,000	- 16,000	23,000

The expansion challenge was summed up by Sir James Duff, the former Vice Chancellor of Durham University, who wrote in a note for the Robbins committee that universities were "wonderfully

34 This is the equivalent of Table 3 in Robbins report. Figures include full-time enrolments from home and overseas domiciles at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Universities includes post-92 universities, which explains the expansion in student numbers in universities by 2000-01 and the reduction at other institutions.

run after. … But we are not particularly popular, because we cannot satisfy the demands for intake and output."[35]

Some feared that there was a limited pool of talent to take advantage of the opportunity for higher education. Robbins comprehensively dismisses this argument. Indeed he turns it on its head. Instead he defines as the conservative and realistic approach that the same proportion of suitably qualified students should get to university. He challenges his critics to explain why they believe that in future a lower proportion of school leavers with A-levels should go to university. He argues that "in general cultural standards and in competitive intellectual power, vigorous action is needed to avert the danger of a serious relative decline in this country's standing."[36]

The actual number of enrolments in 1980 was 535,000 – just 23,000 lower than Robbins' projections. Looking back in 1980 on this growth, Robbins said: "I doubt very much if there has been any general lowering of admission standards."[37] Robbins would however have been surprised by the distribution of that growth. As Table 3.1 shows, one big difference was where people chose to study. There was less growth in universities and rather more in lower cost institutions than he expected. In 1980-81 there were 39,000 fewer enrolments in universities than his report projected, and 16,000 more in polytechnic, teacher training and FE colleges.

The report makes two key assumptions about this growth which proved hard to reconcile in practice. First, it assumed a substantial proportion of these extra places would be in science and technology. (The growth already planned by the UGC was to be two-thirds in science and technology.) Secondly, as women were

35 National Archives, ED117/3.

36 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 47.

37 Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education Revisited*, 1980, 25.

particularly under-represented at university and their forecasts for growth rested on forecasts of better school attainments, this would mean a particularly dramatic surge in the number of female students (from 68,000 in 1962 to 253,000 in 1980).[38] Together these two assumptions required a massive shift of girls towards science and technology. This may have been right and desirable but it required a shift in cultural attitudes and patterns of school teaching which could not be delivered in the time available. In the event, Robbins correctly forecast a big increase in female students but many more of them went into arts and humanities, which is where overcrowding and resource pressures proved most intense. The increase in capacity for science and technology went ahead of demand, meaning entry standards fell – affecting perceptions of some of these disciplines in ways which it took years to recover from.

This shift in the gender balance in higher education has carried on. In the 1960s only 25 per cent of full-time students at UK institutions were female. But in 2011–12 they were in the majority – 54 per cent of full-time students at UK HEIs were female. The number of women studying has grown by a larger proportion than the number of men across every subject. Women are still under-represented in sciences (maths and physics) and the applied sciences (computing, engineering, technology and architecture), but the margin has narrowed from the 1960s when only three per cent of students studying "applied science" were women. Arguably the most dramatic increase is in medicine: in the 1960s only 22 in every 100 medical students were women, but by 2011–12 this had risen to 59 in every 100.[39]

38 As calculated by John Carswell, *Government and the Universities in Britain*, 1985, 172.

39 The definition of medical students includes veterinary science students to be consistent with definitions applied in the Robbins report.

Table 3.2. Full-time university students by sex and faculty, 1961–62 and 2011–12[40]

	Percentage of students in each faculty who were of each sex			Percentage of students who were in each faculty		
	Men	Women	Men and women	Men	Women	Men and women
1961–62						
Humanities	58	42	100	25	53	32
Social studies	77	23	100	11	10	11
Science	78	22	100	26	22	25
Applied science	97	3	100	22	2	17
Medical subjects	78	22	100	15	13	15
All faculties	75	25	100	100	100	100
2011–12						
Humanities	38	62	100	9	11	10
Social studies	43	57	100	30	33	32
Science	57	43	100	15	9	12
Applied science	55	45	100	30	20	25
Medical subjects	41	59	100	3	4	4
Other subjects	*34*	*65*	*100*	*13*	*22*	*18*
All faculties	46	54	100	100	100	100

Thus the situation we face in today's society is one that might have seemed unlikely in 1960s Britain, with more women entering university than there are men even submitting a UCAS form.[41] This is a remarkable achievement for women, who were outnumbered in universities by men as recently as the 1990s. It is also the culmination of a longstanding educational trend, with boys and

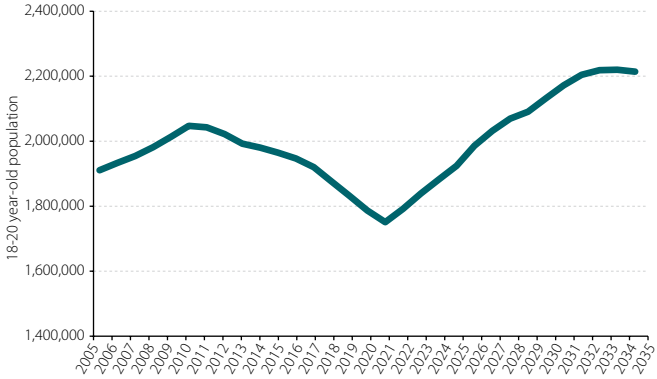
40 This is the equivalent to Table 12 in the Robbins report on *Higher Education*. Subject groups are defined as closely as possible to the groupings described in the Robbins report; practical subjects such as physical education, domestic science, handicraft, art, music and drama are included in the "other subjects" category, as are education subjects.

41 UCAS, *End of Cycle report*, 2012.

men finding it harder to overcome the obstacles in the way of learning. It is a real challenge for different policy-makers.

The demographic background now is the opposite of the one facing Robbins. We are currently in the middle of a ten-year period of decline in the size of the young English population, with the number of 18-20 year olds expected to continue to fall until 2020. Maintaining the absolute number of people going to university broadly constant is consistent with a slight increase in the proportion of young people going. However, from 2021 onwards the 18-20 year old population is projected to start increasing again and by 2035 the number of 18-20 year olds will be almost 200,000 higher than in 2011.

Figure 3.1. 18-20 year old population projections[42]



There are a number of ways in which we could come up with estimates of future student demand. One approach referred to in the Robbins report is to take the application rate of people from the most affluent part of the population and assume that people from poorer backgrounds achieve similar rates of participation in higher

42 Composite of 2010 based and 2011 based ONS population estimates. 2011 based estimates are not currently available for years beyond 2021.

education. Robbins estimates that 45 per cent of the children of fathers in the "higher professional" category were already going to higher education against 4 per cent of the children of fathers in "skilled manual" work.[43] Data collected by UCAS on acceptance rates shows that, despite recent improvements, there remains a large gap in entry rates: 22 per cent of 18 or 19-year olds living in areas with the lowest participation rates compared to 63 per cent in the most advantaged areas.[44] The variation is shown clearly in parliamentary constituency data. In Wimbledon, 68 per cent of young people progress to higher education. In Nottingham North, just 16 per cent of young people do.[45] If everyone had the entry rate of the highest quintile, the numbers entering higher education would be much higher: 570,000 in 2011–12 instead of the actual figure of 368,000.[46] Extrapolating this further to 2035 using demographic trends would imply very high numbers of overall entrants: around 620,000.

Table 3.3. Possible English entrants at UK higher education institutions if all social groups had the same entry rate of the most advantaged quintile

	Total number of higher education entrants	% increase on 2011
2011 (actual)	368,000	–
2011 (estimated value)	*570,000*	*55%*
2020	*500,000*	*36%*
2035	*620,000*	*68%*

43 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 51.

44 UCAS, *End of Cycle report*, 2012.

45 Forthcoming data to be published by Hefce this week.

46 The five POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) groupings partition areas of the UK according to the area's young participation rate in higher education. Each of these five groupings have different average participation rates, but here we have calculated the proportional increase that would occur if all 5 quintiles participated in higher education at the rate of the most advantaged quintile, and then applied this proportional increase to the 2011–12 higher education entry rate.

A different way to look at future growth is simply to assume it reflects demographic trends. Extrapolating the current number of entrants purely on the basis of overall trends in birth rates would lead to a fall to 320,000 in 2020 and then a rise back to 400,000 in 2035. But we can also consider the changing social composition of the population. The numbers in the more advantaged social groups are expected to rise slightly faster than those from less advantaged backgrounds so this could affect the number even if there were to be no change in the participation rates of social groups. Given that the former have higher entry rates currently than the latter, this implies slightly higher figures, other things being equal, of 330,000 in 2020, rising to 410,000 by 2035.

Table 3.4. Possible future changes in English entrants at UK higher education institutions according to demographic trends

	Higher education entrants projected by population		Higher education entrants projected by population and social demographics	
	Total entrants	% change	Total entrants	% change
2011	368,000	–	368,000	–
2020	*320,000*	*-12%*	*330,000*	*-9%*
2035	*400,000*	*8%*	*410,000*	*12%*

A further method is to assume that we achieve the same rates of participation as other leading economies. The participation rate here has risen considerably relative to the US in the period since Robbins, yet we are still behind. In the UK 64 per cent of people enter higher education during the course of their lifetime, whereas 72 per cent of people do in the US.[47] If England matched the US, the number would increase from 368,000 to 415,000.

47 BIS publishes statistics on Higher Education Initial Participation Rates (HEIPR). In 2011–12 the HEIPR for those aged 17-30 in England was 49 per cent. In order to carry out international comparisons, OECD statistics for the UK, published in Table C3.1a of *Education at a Glance, 2013* have been used.

Finally we can apply a measure which was used in the Browne report of 2010 but is not considered by Robbins. This is to look at the number of qualified and motivated applicants who are denied a place after applying – in other words, unmet demand. Robbins predicted a shortfall of 25,000 university places in 1967-8. This is hard to estimate: one method is to look at the number who reapply for university after a first rejection. This would suggest unmet demand today of around 50,000 students.[48] If we add this to our current entrants figure of 368,000 we will have the number of people who could currently enter higher education. Increasing this figure further in line with expected demographic change to 2035 would give us a figure of about 460,000 entrants.

Table 3.5. Possible English entrants at UK institutions according to demographic trends and demand revealed in reapplication rates

	Higher education entrants projected by population, social demographics and unmet demand	
	Total entrants	% increase on 2011
2011 (actual)	368,000	–
2011 (estimated value)	*420,000*	*14%*
2020	*380,000*	*4%*
2035	*460,000*	*26%*

The English system is quite unusual amongst advanced countries for having such selective systems of entry to university: "The English style is to select and restrict entry, nurture carefully and expect high completion and low dropout rates."[49] Other countries allow virtually automatic progression to your local university if you have the requisite qualifications. They have higher drop-out rates as a result.

48 This is calculated by applying the 38 per cent reapplication rate of unplaced applicants through UCAS in recent years to the difference between applicants and entrants.

49 Michael Sanderson, 'Higher education in the post-war years', *Contemporary Record*, 1991, 419.

The Robbins report was a long-term plan for growth. But there were immediate pressures at the time. This gave the opposition parties the opportunity to criticise the Conservative Government for ignoring the demands of the short-term bulge arising from the post-war baby boom. They contrasted the long-term vision of growth with the need for extra places now.

Harold Wilson said:

> *the Government, apparently for electoral reasons, have rushed into accepting this vast, imaginative, costly programme. A figure of £3,500 million is the programme for higher education. We welcome this fact, but does not the right hon. Gentleman recognise, as the Robbins Report says, that there are 30,000 students who will not get a place in the next two or three years because of the failure to make provision for them?*[50]

Jo Grimond for the Liberals complained:

> *The Robbins Report is an indictment of the Government. It points out that we must have a crash programme. It is astonishing to find the Government now writing to universities asking them to tell the Government what they want – "Finance is no object, we must cure this". We cannot cure this illness in education in a matter of a few weeks. The damage is done and it cannot be undone.*[51]

But the meat was in the longer-term proposals. The report was accepted by the Government on the day after its publication, even though: "This implies more than doubling the annual cost of higher education in 10 years."[52] A looming general election, which

50 Hansard, 12 November 1963, col.33.

51 Hansard, 12 November 1963, col.58.

52 *Higher Education: Government Statement on the Report of the Committee under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-63*, 1963.

occurred less than a year later, was no doubt a factor in the rapid acceptance of such expansionary proposals. The timing is in stark contrast to the other two big post-war higher education reports, the Dearing report (1997) and the Browne report (2010), which appeared soon after general elections thereby easing the politics of asking individual graduates to pay more for their education.

Among those who opposed the report's expansionary message was *The Times*. Lord Robbins attacked the newspaper vehemently in the House of Lords in December 1963:

> *I see no reasonable ground for doubting that the ability is there if we are willing to use it; and, what is more, I see no reasonable ground for doubting that it will come forward if we are willing to help it. All the indications of trend since 1944 point in the same direction. But, my Lords, if this is true, if there is a likelihood of numbers of the order we envisaged actually capable and willing to benefit from higher education, it follows that, if the editor of The Times and those who think with him have their way, henceforward we shall be progressively turning away ever larger numbers of young people who on present entry standards would have got in. That may or may not be a tenable position designed to safeguard certain excellences not believed to be otherwise capable of preservation, but it certainly needs to be explicitly formulated that way.*[53]

Precisely how to fund the proposed expansion was left by the Robbins committee and the outgoing Conservative Government as a problem for future governments to grapple with. It is a subject we will turn to in chapter six. The report concludes:

> *The costs of the plan we have put forward are considerable. They involve an increase in the percentage of the national income*

53 Lords Hansard, 11 December 1963, cols 1254-1255.

devoted to higher education. They may involve increases of taxation, though whether this will be so depends upon the extent of other commitments, upon financial policy in general and upon the increase of productivity. But we are convinced that no economic consideration need hinder their adoption if we as a nation desire the educational changes they will make possible.[54]

HM Treasury were more worried. Officials wanted tougher means-testing of student grants in order to "pave the way towards the introduction of loans for students".[55] Student loans were duly considered by the Wilson Governments of 1964-70, with Shirley Williams even consulting the sector on their introduction in 1969. But they made no real progress before the 1970 election, after which the new Secretary of State for Education and Science, Margaret Thatcher, rejected the whole concept. Loans went out of vogue for more than a decade and it was a full generation before they were introduced for maintenance in 1990, as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's last great social reform.

54 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 216.

55 Quoted in Nicholas Hillman, 'From Grants for All to Loans for All: Undergraduate Finance from the Implementation of the Anderson Report (1962) to the Implementation of the Browne Report (2012)', *Contemporary British History*. 27:3, 2013, 255.

CHAPTER 4: TEACHING QUALITY

It is not sufficient to think only of who will progress to university. We must also think about the experience they will have when they get there, and in particular the quality of the teaching they will receive. Lionel Robbins was deeply committed to his own role as a university teacher. Claus Moser and Richard Layard, the key researchers on the Robbins committee, confirm that teaching quality was one of Robbins's chief preoccupations. Lord Moser reflected: "Having known him so well I have no doubt that when Robbins thought of universities he thought first and foremost of the students." He recalled that later in Robbins's life, when he needed to cut back on his academic duties at the London School of Economics because of major commitments elsewhere, he was adamant that he wished to keep teaching first year economics.[56]

One of the principal aims of this Government's higher education reforms has been to place students back at the heart of universities where they belong. That means strengthening the incentives to focus on teaching. Perhaps one of the most surprising things, when reflecting on the impact of his great report, is that such a brilliant economist did not suggest any economic incentives to ensure that universities focused on teaching when it mattered so much to him. Instead ever sharper incentives to reward high-quality research were introduced over subsequent decades. It has fallen to this Government to create similar incentives and rewards for teaching.

Funding now follows the student, making student choice critically important to institutions. And we have reduced number controls, making that choice real. This academic year we freed from number controls new full-time students with ABB or equivalent grades – a third of all full-time students. The most selective

56 Conversation with Lord Moser, September 2013.

institutions have effectively been freed from all number controls and are now free to recruit as many students as they wish. And our Key Information Set gives prospective students the data they need to make meaningful comparisons on costs, courses and employability.

Such incentives were needed. Universities have focused primarily on research because that is where the funding and prestige came from, and where the competition was strongest. Research is a vital function for our universities. We can indeed be very proud of the extraordinary amount of high-quality research which is produced by our £4.6 billion cash-protected science and research budget. No other country gets such a return. One reason for this exceptional performance is that over the past twenty years the academic community and governments have created very strong competitive funding for research which drives such excellent performance across a breadth of disciplines. However there was no matching incentive to focus on teaching. Universities had a fixed allocation of student places which most could fill almost regardless of the offer they made to students. The student experience suffered. This was exacerbated by the big fall in the 1990s in the resource for teaching each student. The introduction of higher fees covered by income-contingent loans has stopped this decline.

The second appendix to the Robbins report gives a detailed picture of the working lives of students – and also their teachers – in the 1960s. For instance, the average number of students in a lecture in the 1960s was 23.[57] Now a popular professor at many institutions wouldn't be surprised to be addressing a theatre of 200 undergraduates or more.

Students were asked to provide information on how many lectures and "discussion periods" they received in a typical week.

57 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 352.

Academics were asked similar questions about their teaching commitments. A discussion period was defined as a class requiring much more participation from the student. And usefully, the report broke this down further into tutorials (involving one to four students), small seminars (involving five to nine students) and large seminars (with ten or more students).[58]

Some members of the academic community argue that the crude counting of hours misunderstands the nature of higher education. The crucial difference between higher education and school is of course independence. Undergraduates shouldn't expect to be spoonfed a programme of knowledge. A great deal of work must be conducted independently, under their own steam. As an academic, Robbins understood this. Undergraduates in the 1960s reported an average of 26 hours of private study a week in the humanities, 23 in social studies, and 20 in applied science.[59] The figures today are not directly comparable but seem to be in general around five or more hours lower.[60] Robbins repeatedly stresses a point that has been a key part of discussions around the notion of a student consumer today – the idea that higher education is a partnership between student and teacher or institution, and that both must contribute and engage. He writes: "Public opinion will not support the cost of higher education unless teachers are actuated by a high sense of professional obligation and students are actuated by a corresponding sense of the obligation to work."[61] That is just as true today. Students aren't merely buying a degree, as they might a holiday. They are engaging in something inherently worthwhile and also investing in their future. The paradox is that unleashing the forces of consumerism with more information for prospective students and funding following their choices is the best way of bringing back traditional academic focus on high-quality teaching.

58 Ibid., 252.

59 Ibid., 278.

60 Hepi / Which, *The Student Academic Experience Survey*, 2013, 11.

61 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 198.

Universities may worry that any discussion of contact hours necessarily leads to false expectations. The classic example given is the history student who is up in arms about her friend studying chemistry having twice as much contact time as she does – without understanding the different practical demands of the two. The Robbins data shows that these disciplinary differences are not a new development. Only 11 per cent of students in the arts and humanities spent 15 or more hours a week being taught in the early 1960s, but the majority of students in science subjects did.[62]

Nevertheless, parents talk to their student children about their university timetable and query whether they are getting value for money: "You really only get three hours of lectures a week?"; "How long do you actually spend in the lab?"; "What do you mean you haven't sat down with any of the professors yet?" With the advent of higher fees, such questions are becoming more insistent. The clear breakdown of work commitments for each course now provided to all students and parents – including the percentage of time spent on independent study – gives them a realistic idea of what to expect, as well as an important basis for judging institutions.

The pendulum has swung too far away from teaching. A new analysis of TRAC data on universities' full economic costs by Hefce has revealed some stark results. At the time of Robbins, universities reported a teaching:research split of 55:45, based on a diary survey given to academics.[63] A similar exercise was carried out in the mid-late '80s, and that reported a teaching:research split of 64:36.[64] This shift away from research reflected the major expansion of student numbers that had taken place during this period, with new universities being created and an increase in the student:staff ratio. In the published TRAC data for 2011-12 for all Hefce-funded

62 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 257.

63 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 182.

64 Universities Funding Council, *Recurrent Funding Allocations for Teaching and Research*, 1990–91.

institutions it appears that teaching is receiving a considerable amount of attention, with a teaching:research ratio of 69:31 overall in the sector.[65] However, this masks big differences across the sector.

Our new analysis looks at the breakdown of full economic costs by different groups of institutions. This shows that the teaching:research split for the universities that existed when Robbins reported is now around 40:60, and for the universities created after Robbins but before 1992 it is 43:57. The ratio in the former polytechnics and FE colleges is very different: 89:11; they are heavily focused on teaching. Our analysis suggests that despite decades of change, the pre-Robbins universities appear to be more focused on research now than at any other time. Given the growth in the number of students, even at these older institutions, it is surprising that the proportion of total academic time devoted to teaching them appears to have fallen from 55 per cent to 40 per cent.

One criticism of Robbins's report is that he did not think through the implication of his own expansion plans for the balance of teaching and research. If academics maintained their previous balance between teaching and research there would be a big expansion of research too. It would be in disciplines where teaching demand was growing unrelated to any wider research priorities. If that were to be avoided Robbins needed to set out how research priorities could be set separately. Or he would need to show how a new cohort of academics focussed mainly on teaching could be recruited. The report does not get much beyond exhortation on these key issues. The creation of a dual support mechanism for university research (with funding from the UGC and the Research Councils) in the Science and Technology Act of 1965 was the beginning of an answer to these questions.

65 www.hefce.ac.uk/data/year/2013/tracincomeandcostsbyactivity2011-12/#d.en.81819.

Robbins understood teaching and research could complement each other; "some students could be better taught. But the remedy for this is to be sought in improved arrangements for teaching and these need not be made at the expense of research."[66] If anything he thinks the problem lies in the type of research which is encouraged. He fears that in promotion "published work counts for too much".[67] Instead he values "breadth of culture, ripeness of judgment and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity".[68]

Professor Graham Gibbs, probably our most respected expert in this field, argues in his report *Dimensions of Quality*, that contact hours are an imperfect measure of quality and educational gain. He warns that they should not be used as a stand-alone indicator without reference to what is done in that time, who teaches and how much effort students put in.[69] Institutions can lay on extra lectures – but this is unlikely to result in more satisfied students with a better grasp of their subject. This brings us back to Robbins, and his analysis not just of teaching time, but of the time spent in discussion periods.

The Robbins survey data in the table below shows that on average undergraduates spent one-and-a-half hours a week in discussion periods, and one hour of this was in either small seminars or tutorials. They spent an average of 15 hours in some sort of teaching session. Predictably there were big variations across disciplines and institutions. At Oxford and Cambridge, the institutions which have long been synonymous with tutorial-based teaching, almost half of all undergraduates spent two to three hours a week in some sort of discussion class each week, and one-and-a-half hours of this was in tutorials. There was a strong contrast between arts and science teaching. In science subjects

66 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 181.

67 Ibid., 184.

68 Ibid., 184.

69 Graham Gibbs, *Dimensions of Quality*, ,2010, 21-26.

undergraduates spent half an hour a week in tutorials or small seminars (though they spent seven-and-a-half hours in practicals). Meanwhile in the humanities and social sciences students spent one-and-a-half hours a week in these small classes.[70]

The recent HEPI / Which student experience survey suggests that overall, institutions have been keeping pace with the early 1960s on small group teaching – and in some cases improving (1.2 hours of teaching on average in groups of one to five students now as against 1.0 hours on average in groups of one to four then). It found that on average students at both pre- and post-92 institutions spend one hour a week in a class of five or fewer, and this rises to one-and-a-half hours in Russell Group institutions. Again, this seems to vary widely by subject – and Oxbridge is a case apart.

Table 4.1. Average hours of teaching per week received by full-time students – Gt Britain – Spring Term, 1961–62[71]

	Lectures	Discussion periods attended by			Practicals	Other teaching	All teaching
		10 or more students	5-9 students	1-4 students			
University group							
Oxford & Cambridge	6.3	0.2	0.2	1.6	2.4	0.3	11.0
London	7.8	0.9	0.7	0.4	5.2	0.7	15.7
Large Civic	8.2	0.6	0.6	0.3	5.4	0.7	15.8
Smaller civic	7.8	0.6	0.6	0.4	3.1	0.4	12.9
Wales	8.5	0.4	0.6	0.4	5.2	0.4	15.5
Scotland	9.6	0.7	0.4	0.2	5.5	0.6	17.0
All undergraduates	8.1	0.6	0.5	1.0	4.6	0.5	14.8

70 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 253-257.

71 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 186.

Table 4.2. Average contact hours per week for full-time students (by size of group) – UK – Spring Term 2012–13[72]

	Teaching sessions attended by					
	More than 100 students	51-100 students	16-50 students	6-15 students	1-5 students	Total hours
University type						
Russell Group	3.4	2.3	3.1	2.5	1.6	12.9
Pre-92	2.2	2.3	3.7	2.4	0.9	11.6
Post-92	1.3	1.7	4.7	3.1	1.0	11.8
Specialist	1.4	1.5	5.2	3.3	2.7	14.0
All students	2.0	2.0	4.1	2.8	1.2	12.2

These statistics suggest there was not a massively higher amount of teaching time at the time of Robbins compared with now. Yet perhaps the most important message we can take away from the Robbins analysis of class size is that the majority of students and academics surveyed saw these smaller interactive classes as being of particular importance and desirability. Around half of all students wanted an increase in discussion periods. The same proportion of teachers agreed. Robbins concluded:

> *We have received from both university teachers and student organisations extensive complaints concerning methods of instruction. The substance of these complaints has been nearly always the same: undue reliance on lectures, often delivered with too little consideration of the needs and capacities of the audience, and insufficient personal contact. The remedy generally demanded is the adoption of what is called the "tutorial system", though what exactly is meant by this is not always clearly defined by those who desire it.*[73]

72 HEPI / Which, *The Student Academic Experience Survey*, 2013, 8.

73 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 186.

As the report also noted, this probably could not be achieved without a cutback on lectures, but almost half of students felt this would be a fair trade-off.[74]

Fifty years on, a 2012 survey conducted by the National Union of Students came up with very similar results. It showed that half of students still feel that more interactive teaching sessions would improve their experience. Interestingly, the survey found that they want these group sessions not only to improve their understanding of their subject, but also to develop relationships with their peers.[75]

Table 4.3. Undergraduates' view on each type of teaching, Robbins 1963[76]

		Want more of this type of teaching		
	Want less of this type of teaching	Already have this type of teaching	Do not have this type of teaching	Satisfied with present arrangements
Type of teaching				
Lectures	16%	8%	n/a	76%
Seminars	4%	19%	13%	64%
Tutorials	1%	19%	28%	52%
Practicals	8%	5%	1%	86%
Written class exercises	2%	6%	6%	86%
Field periods	1%	4%	8%	87%

74 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 261-3.

75 National Union of Students, *Student Experience Research 2012 – Part 1: Teaching and Learning*, 2012.

76 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 261-263

Table 4.4. What would improve the quality of teaching and learning experience at your university? 2012[77]

Type of activity/change	Want more
More interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials	50.2%
More individual teaching sessions/tutorials	43.3%
More contact time with personal tutor	41.9%
Lecturers/tutors with better teaching skills	34.6%
Additional support such as study skills training	26.1%
More lectures	26.1%
Availability of facilities for practical work	23.7%

This is clearly an enduring concern for students. They do not care simply about teaching time. They care about having classes that involve them in a discussion – which stands to reason if we are to uphold the ideal of the university experience as one that teaches students to question and to think.

This is a very useful pointer for us as we review how we might extend the Key Information Set data in the future. Asking institutions to provide a breakdown of the average number of discussion classes for each course – broken down as Robbins suggests into tutorials, small seminars and large seminars – would allow students and parents to judge courses by the sort of teaching they value. The cost of this could be low, given that institutions collect this sort of data for timetables and the like. And it would make good teaching visible, providing a powerful incentive for institutions to continue to improve. This is an idea on which we propose to consult the sector.

Robbins also provides detailed analysis of another element of the academic experience that students feel particularly strongly about – assessment and feedback. The report reveals that nearly two-thirds of students studying humanities or science subjects had

77 National Union of Students, *Student Experience Research 2012 – Part 1: Teaching and Learning*, 2012, 18.

to prepare written work once or more a week (rising to 90 per cent of all students at Oxbridge). Of these, 61 per cent said they usually received both written and discussion-based feedback.

Table 4.5. Correction of written work prepared by undergraduates, Robbins 1963[78]

	Receive this
Written comments and discussion	61%
Written comments but no discussion	14%
Discussion only	20%
Other	5%

Table 4.6. Which ways do you receive assessment/feedback and what is most useful, NUS 2012[79]

	Receive this	Find most useful
Written grades/marks	86%	75%
Written comments	78%	79%
Online comments	39%	47%
Verbal feedback in an individual meeting	42%	66%
Verbal feedback in a group	33%	36%

Since its launch in 2005 the National Student Satisfaction survey has consistently flagged up assessment and feedback as a weak spot for universities. There has been some improvement. The satisfaction rating for this category this year was 72 per cent – an improvement on 2012. But this is still significantly behind the overall student satisfaction level of 85 per cent.

We expect to see institutions improving their performance in this area. Students are right to expect to have essays or problem

78 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Appendix Two B*, 1963, 267.

79 National Union of Students, *Student Experience Research 2012 – Part 1: Teaching and Learning*, 2012, 16.

sets marked regularly. They are right to expect a useful discussion or written notes when they are returned. We should ensure that the incentive is there for institutions to focus on these things – and that students can easily compare them on this basis. One option would be for the Key Information Set data to mirror what was available to Robbins fifty years ago, with a requirement for institutions to specify how many essays or how much work students can expect to have marked on each course – and whether feedback will be written or discussed.

We are starting to see some welcome examples of institutions investing to improve the academic experience of their students. Coventry University reviewed its entire undergraduate portfolio in preparation for the introduction of its £9,000 fees. All modules now have a much more rigorous evaluation system, with faster reporting to staff and students. Classroom observation feeds into staff development. And marking is returned quickly. Staff have committed to return all final year work within two weeks, and all other work within three.

Exeter University has involved the Students' Guild in deciding how the extra income from student fees should be spent. Their first priority was improved sports facilities and their next was to improve academic feedback and reduce class sizes. As a result the university has made a three-week pledge on assessed work and has recruited 282 extra academic teaching staff.

SOAS is working much more closely with its students' union on academic policy. The union sets educational priorities which are discussed at academic board. As a result students can now submit coursework online, and course evaluation has also moved online – making it easier to gain feedback from part-time students in particular.

The University of the West of England has invested in virtual workplace technology to bring teaching to life. Student nurses tackle cases from simulated patients, and law undergraduates work in a virtual solicitor's office with input from professional solicitors.

And Sheffield Hallam University has taken on twelve new employability advisors to help final year students launch their careers, as well as ramping up numbers of student internships with local small and medium-sized businesses.

We need to understand more about how the whole sector is responding to this new emphasis on the student academic experience. My Department is working with other partners to undertake new research in this area. We are also planning work to explore in more depth how students view the different learning activities and how these might be used and combined to improve learning.

The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) system of Institutional Review includes, for the first time, a judgement on the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. Already four institutions have been commended by the QAA for going beyond expectations including, most recently, the University of Lincoln. Learning there is grounded in research, so that students are making their own discoveries supported by academics. This was recognised by QAA reviewers as a feature of good practice.

Looking back we will wonder how the higher education system was ever allowed to become so lopsided away from teaching. Robbins saw the problem and tried to tackle it. Without radical changes to how universities were financed however it was going to be difficult to change their behaviour. Now there is an opportunity to use our funding changes to push a real cultural change back towards teaching. We detect signs that this is happening and further changes to the Key Information Set could take it further.

CHAPTER 5: BREADTH OF STUDY

Another theme close to Robbins' heart was the danger of excessive specialisation. This comes up again and again in his great report. He was concerned that English schools were forcing children to narrow their focus far too early. And he laid much of the blame for this squarely with the universities, arguing that first degree courses were often too specialised and that led to schools focussing on narrow and specialised A-levels and A-level combinations .

The report reveals that at the beginning of the 1960s the vast majority of students took A-levels in either science or the arts, but not both. As the table below shows, only 4 per cent of boys and 8 per cent of girls obtained a pass in at least one science and one arts A-level. The report is stark about the consequences of this:

> *We do not believe…that it is in the public interest that a student of natural science or technology is frequently not competent in even one foreign language, a student of economics is often without the desirable complement of mathematics, and a student of history or literature may be unaware of the significance of science and the scientific method.*[80]

However, by 2011-12 there had been a dramatic shift towards more of a subject mix. While there are still many students who specialise at A-level, half now pass at least one science and one arts A-level, giving them a much broader base for undergraduate study.

Yet we need to continue to be wary of the pressures driving specialisation. Ask a group of physicists for example about how prepared their first year students were when they arrived at university; they may cite worrying gaps in 18-year olds' knowledge and demand improvements. The same goes for the historians. Each

80 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 77.

discipline can press for more knowledge of their own subject. This drives more specialisation at A-level – reinforcing the trend Robbins was worried about.

Table 5.1. School leavers with 2 or more passes at A-level in different combinations of subjects, England and Wales, 1960-61 and 2011-12[81]

	Percentage with passes in these subjects		
	Boys	Girls	Boys and Girls
1960–61			
Arts subjects only	37	66	48
Science subjects only	59	26	46
At least one arts and one science subject	4	8	6
All qualified school leavers	*100*	*100*	*100*
2011–12			
Arts subjects only	28	37	33
Science subjects only	22	11	16
At least one arts and one science subject	50	52	51
All qualified school leavers	*100*	*100*	*100*

Robbins is correct that universities have great power to shape young people's decisions, and schools "adapt their practice so as to provide what they believe to be the best chance of obtaining a place in a university."[82] In this country, quite rightly, they control their own admissions, so naturally students will be guided by them on how they structure their subject choices after GCSE. And whereas they used to have no direct impact on what went into A-levels some of our leading universities are now involved directly in their design. The Russell Group are setting up their new A-Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB). They are gearing up to input initially on

81 This is the equivalent to Table 31 in the Robbins report on Higher Education. Statistics for 1960–61 refer to England and Wales; statistics for 2011–12 refer to England only. Statistics for 2011–12 refer to pupils achieving two or more A-levels at A*-E.

82 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 76.

the content of the new language and maths exams which Ofqual and awarding organisations will be developing.

This is a great opportunity. They want to push for a move away from teaching to the test and towards the sort of independent, critical thinking that will prove invaluable preparation for any subject at university. ALCAB has a great opportunity to show that universities understand the need for students with a breadth of understanding and knowledge.

Looking back in 1980, Robbins was even more emphatic on this subject: "sixth form specialisation … runs the acute danger of becoming an active agent in the disintegration of our common culture. A heavy responsibility rests upon those universities whose entrance requirements encourage or even countenance this tendency."[83]

Robbins was right. We want scientists with an awareness of historical context; historians with the maths to handle statistics; mathematicians who can speak another language. No subject exists in a vacuum, and if anything characterises knowledge and innovation today it is cross-disciplinarity. Fifty years ago Robbins said that universities had a vital civilising role. If we want to uphold that noble ideal today, then the role of universities in A-level reform must be a chance to advance the cause of a broad, liberal education.

Nonetheless, there is an important distinction to be made between the need for breadth in general, and the need for maths skills in particular. In an interview with *The Listener* in 1967 Robbins was asked why the numbers opting for applied and pure sciences had fallen below expectations. He blamed what he called "the terror

83 Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education Revisited*, 1980, 18.

of mathematics", caused by poor teaching and a preoccupation in university maths departments with producing "aces".[84]

This issue has not gone away. Last year the Lords Science and Technology Committee expressed its shock that many Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) undergraduates lacked the mathematical skills required to cope with their course at university.[85] The National Audit Office has warned that this is an issue for student retention.[86]

Maths is a core part of science and engineering subjects – but it comes into many others. As Liz Truss argues with great passion, it is the universal analytical tool which matters more and more in today's higher education. It matters to the politics student who has to grapple with difficult statistical data, or the nursing student performing a drug calculation. And after leaving university many graduates will find themselves faced with numerical reasoning tests when competing for jobs. Yet only 16 per cent of undergraduates studying subjects other than maths have an A-level in maths under their belt. Often they will have forgotten much of what they once knew, and even if they haven't, their confidence in their own abilities may be low.

This is why Michael Gove's moves to ensure that everyone continues some level of mathematical study until the age of 18 are so important. Another important initiative is "sigma", a Hefce-funded project. It is establishing approachable maths support services at institutions across the country. Thanks to their work, politics students suddenly confronted with a regression analysis have someone to turn to. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering

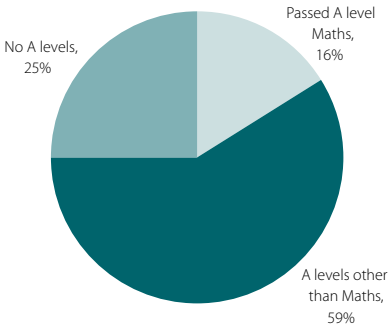
84 *The Listener*, 6 July 1967.

85 House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology report *Higher Education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects*, 2012.

86 National Audit Office, *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education*, 2007.

and Mathematics) undergraduates too are receiving expert support to bring their maths skills up to speed.

Figure 5.1. Those who studied subjects other than maths in higher education by whether they have A-level maths[87]



Yet Robbins was not only concerned about specialisation within first degrees because of the impact it had on schools. Evidence from industry, professional organisations and university teachers pointed strongly to many undergraduate courses being "overloaded" with specialist content at the expense of the rudiments.[88] The report argued that these specialist degrees were not delivering what employers wanted and nor, it argued, were they suitable for many of the students who now studied them. The foundation of Keele University, while the Robbins inquiry was underway, was a deliberate attempt to deliver a more broad-based higher education through dual-honours degree programmes, which remain the main form of study among undergraduates at Keele.

87 BIS internal analysis of matched education data. Pupils from maintained schools in England who entered HE by age 19 in 2010-11.

88 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 101.

Robbins was resoundingly confident that expansion would deliver the shift away from specialised first degrees that he considered so vital. The report did not mince words:

> *we regard such a change as a necessary condition for any large expansion of universities. Greatly increased numbers will create the opportunity to develop broader courses on a new and exciting scale, and we recommend that universities should make such development one of their primary aims.*[89]

In reality change was much slower. His comments on course content in a House of Lords debate at the start of the next decade suggest this caused him some considerable frustration. He warned: "We are still, I think, a little exposed to the reproach that we are machines to produce dons to produce dons to produce dons..."[90]

Robbins's warning that first degrees should be suited to those studying them is certainly more pertinent than ever now that a much higher proportion of students arrive at university with a wider spread of qualifications. Many universities are already focussing on making certain courses more easily accessible to a broader audience. Classics is a case in point. In 2010-11 80 per cent of undergraduates studying Classics did not have an A-level in either Latin or Greek.[91]

It is easy to argue that making courses more general is a rush to the bottom. But it need not be. There is a reason why watching a top professor teach physics on iTunes is often so compelling. She knows her audience is a varied one. Without doubt many won't have A-level physics. That means she has to think again about what she says, and how she says it. And often what shines out just as

89 Ibid., 93.

90 Robbins, House of Lords debate, 15 July 1970, col. 609.

91 Matched data from the National Pupil Database, the Student Record and the Individualised Learner Record.

clearly as the key points is an infectious passion for the subject. A broad liberal arts education (which includes the sciences) need not mean dumbing down.

Robbins's vision was that specialisation was best reserved for postgraduate study. The report called for a rapid increase in the numbers going on to postgraduate work, and seemed in little doubt that this would happen as a result of the increase in undergraduates: "Experience shows that the appetite grows by what it feeds on."[92] This prediction was right. Robbins estimated that in 1961-62 14 per cent of all full-time students were postgraduates (when excluding education subjects). That proportion has now risen to 17 per cent in 2011-12 and the numbers have rocketed. As the table below shows, in 1961-62 there were nearly 15,000 postgraduates (excluding those training in education). By 2010-11 this had risen to nearly 280,000. Yet crucially, from the perspective of Robbins specialisation agenda, there has been an explosion in taught masters students, from just over 24 per cent of all postgraduates then, to 74 per cent now.

Table 5.2. Type of course of full-time UK and Overseas postgraduates, 1961–62 to 2010–11[93]

	Number of postgraduates		All postgraduates	
	Taught	Research	Number	Percentage on taught courses
1961–62	3,600	11,300	14,900	24%
1970–71	14,300	20,700	35,000	41%
1980–81	17,000	22,800	39,800	43%
1990–91	28,100	28,800	56,900	49%
2000–01	94,100	51,600	145,600	65%
2010–11	206,500	72,600	279,100	74%

92 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 101.

93 This is the equivalent to Table 36 in the Robbins report on *Higher Education* but has been expanded to include overseas enrolments. It excludes postgraduates on education courses.

Interestingly, while those opting for research-based masters tend to cite their main motivation as their interest in their subject, taught masters students are most likely to be focused on improving their employment or career prospects.[94] Because of the importance of postgraduate taught courses we are providing £25 million extra of public funding for students on such courses in 2014-15 and £75 million in 2015-16, coming from Hefce and the refocussing of the National Scholarship Programme on postgraduate students.

It is not for ministers to dictate what subjects universities offer – nor the subjects that students choose to study. Yet given that going to university can change your life, it is quite right that students and parents should think hard about which institution and course is right for them. That is why we are requiring universities to provide more information than ever. Students now have easy access to comparable information on everything from employment outcomes for particular courses to how satisfied students are with course assessment or feedback.

94 Based on BIS analysis of Postgraduate Taught Experience Surveys 2009 to 2012.

CHAPTER 6: WHO PAYS?

The question of who should pay for this future expansion of higher education is one that Robbins avoids tackling in any great detail. In fact finance gets just seventeen pages in the hefty 276-page report. As we saw in chapter one, the financial model had largely been set three years earlier by the Anderson report, which ushered in a national student grant system in 1962.

Nonetheless, a number of economists made submissions to the Robbins committee recommending graduate contributions. A submission by the economist AR Prest was remarkably similar to the current system. This was the model that Robbins later came to realise was the right approach for financing higher education – suggesting that we are truer to Robbins than has been recognised.

Prest outlined five options for making funds available to students and the recovery or partial recovery of those funds from those who benefitted: unconditional grants; loans with generous repayment terms; subsidised saving schemes; income tax deductions for fee payments; and finally students entering into a contract to repay a specified proportion of their lifetime earnings. He dismissed the first four and advocated the last as the most promising option.[95]

Even though he described the second option as loans with "low interest and/or generous repayment terms" he was obviously considering something akin to mortgage-style rather than income-contingent repayments. He ruled out this option on the grounds that the potential burden of repayment would deter those from poor backgrounds, given that the size of each monthly repayment would be linked to the size of debt rather than salary. Thus repayment terms would be the same for low earning graduates

95 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Evidence*, 1963, Part 2, 139-52 (later republished in a slightly different form by the Institute of Economic Affairs – *Financing University Education*, 1966).

and someone who becomes a millionaire. Thirty years on, Lord Dearing made a similar critique of the mortgage-style loans in place from 1990.[96]

The fifth option, which Prest advocated, was "a system whereby sums of money are made available from public funds to all potential University students with the necessary minimum academic standard on condition that they enter into a contract to repay a specified proportion of their lifetime earnings to the government". It would act as a loan for some – with optional "lump sum commutation" – but a tax to age 65 for others as they repay an amount determined only by their income. He viewed income-contingent repayment terms as a feature that transformed the nature of the loan: the submission explains: "At one and the same time we place the onus of repayment on those who benefit from this expenditure of funds and ensure that repayments do not cause undue hardship."

The Robbins report is ultimately equivocal, recommending no "immediate recourse" to loans, but leaving the door open for the future.

The report sets out two main arguments for a loans scheme. The first argument is about distribution of burdens: "The recipient of the subsidy is being put in a position to command a higher income in virtue of taxes paid, in part at least, by those whose incomes are smaller."[97] So it is only fair to expect graduates with higher incomes to pay back. The second argument is an appeal to "morals and incentive": "It is said that the student financed by grants is sometimes apt to take his privilege for granted: and that this may have as a by-product the lack of any particular sense of

96 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the learning society*, 1997, 335-336.

97 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 210.

obligation and need to work. By contrast, the student financed by loan is likely to have a greater sense of individual responsibility."[98]

However, the report also sets out two arguments against. First, "the connexion between higher education and individual earning power can be overstated". This is actually an argument for income-contingent loans, which graduates only pay back if they are earning above a minimum level. The second objection is the effect on young people if they "emerge from the process of education with a load of debt".[99] He is particularly worried "that British parents would be strengthened in their age long disinclination to consider their daughters to be as deserving of higher education as their sons".[100]

The report concludes this discussion by pointing out: "If as time goes on the habit [of going into higher education] is more firmly established, the arguments of justice of distribution and of the advantage of increasing individual responsibility may come to weigh more heavily and lead to some experiment in this direction."[101]

In her recent biography of Robbins, Susan Howson notes that the committee's minutes reveal they came close to including a line in the report stating that loans might become "acceptable in about ten years' time".[102]

In a lecture at Harvard University the year after the report came out Robbins admitted: "I have little doubt that, as time goes on and the advantages of higher education are more generally perceived, and the burdens of financing its expansion are more severely felt, there may easily come a change in attitudes such that the equitable

98 Ibid., 211.

99 Ibid., 211.

100 Ibid., 211.

101 Ibid., 212.

102 Susan Howson, *Lionel Robbins*, 2011, 889.

arguments for a considerable replacement of grants by loans will become practically relevant."[103]

And in his 1980 book *Higher Education Revisited* he explicitly backs an income-contingent loan policy, saying: "It is a matter of regret to me, personally, that I did not at the time sufficiently appreciate the advantages of the Prest scheme, in spite of the fact that it had already been promulgated. My own inclination tended definitely against the policy of subsidy." Yet he warns: "the post Second-World War mythology of the bottomless public purse dies hard".[104]

This Government did not have the luxury of dodging difficult financial issues. Nevertheless, we avoided upfront fees for students, whilst reducing costs for the taxpayer. Meanwhile the resource for teaching is set to rise from £8 billion in 2012-13 to almost £9 billion in 2014-15. According to the OECD, we are "the first European country that established a sustainable approach to HE funding".[105]

The alternatives in a climate of austerity are less funding per student, or fewer students. A cut to funding for teaching would certainly have damaged the quality of education, just as occurred in the past. Nor would it be right to expect a lower proportion of young people to go on to higher education. The Robbins principle of higher education for all those qualified who want to pursue it remains just as pertinent now.

It is reasonable for the graduate who benefits from higher education – not the student – to pay. That was the logic of the maintenance loans introduced in 1990 and Tony Blair's reforms of 2006, which abolished the upfront tuition fees that had been

103 Lionel Robbins, *The University in the Modern World*, 1966, 41.

104 Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education Revisited*, 1980, 33.

105 Andreas Schleicher of the OECD, 26 June 2013, Twitter – https://twitter.com/SchleicherEDU/status/349841642808807424.

introduced in 1998. Indeed, all three main political parties, when faced in government in the last decade with the same dilemma of how to finance HE in a time of economic stringency, have come to the same conclusion – the option that Robbins came to wish he had endorsed back in the 1960s.

The Robbins committee wanted the habit of going to university to become more widespread before any shift to loans. They cited the parents of girls – then much more of a rarity in many subjects as we have seen – as a particular concern. Similarly, critics of our policy warned that disadvantaged people would be put off higher education by the introduction of higher fees. It would have been a tragedy if anyone had been put off going to university by some mistaken belief that they had to pay upfront and could not afford it. But a loan you repay through Pay As You Earn after graduation only when you are earning enough is nothing like a credit card debt. It would be odd to rest policy on the belief that people are systematically irrational.

Instead we launched a student finance tour, sending graduates into schools and colleges to explain how the new finance system worked. The percentage of 18-year olds from the most disadvantaged quintile applying from England has recently risen to 19.8 per cent, the highest rate on record. Moreover, a higher proportion of 18-year olds are enrolling in higher education this autumn than ever before. And more students than ever before are getting their first choice institution.

Naturally, discussions about helping the least advantaged can become emotive. But as Prest saw fifty years ago, the logic here is clear. It would be odd if two graduates should be able to work side by side in identical well-paid jobs, but one faces an income tax rate of nine per cent lower than the other because he came from a poorer background. It would also be odd if one should pay less graduate tax than the other because he studied engineering

while his friend did PPE. It is right that as a young undergraduate you should be assessed on your parents' earnings, and even that there should be some non-repayable maintenance support for the poorest students. But after that, in work, it should be your adult circumstances that matter, not where you come from.

Some critics have commented that our policies are predicated on a belief that only the individual benefits from a degree. However, it is precisely because we understand that a university education also delivers huge returns for society and for the economy that our reformed system for financing higher education has a significant public contribution too. Our reforms rebalance support so that the contribution from graduates goes up from 40 per cent of the total cost to 60 per cent. There are definite private gains, which is why we think it is fair to expect graduates to pay back. But taxpayers still pay 40 per cent of the cost of degrees.

The financial issues we have had to wrestle with were never going to be easy and the proportionate increase in fees was controversial. But if higher education institutions are to be funded properly and if we believe in the world that Robbins was portraying – where the opportunity to transform one's life through higher education exists for the many and not just the few – then they had to be delivered. And it is clear that they closely match the development of Robbins's own thinking.

CHAPTER 7: UNIVERSITIES AND MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT

Having made his recommendations for a more co-ordinated and larger scale national system of higher education, Robbins had to wrestle with one particularly delicate issue. Could the two crucial and linked concepts of institutional autonomy and academic freedom survive?

During the course of the inquiry the committee members visited several different countries where the Government thought nothing of interfering in academic appointments, syllabus content and university expenditure. As a result they were resolute that British academic freedom was something worth fighting for. The report endorses the "cardinal" academic belief that quality was achieved in these countries "in spite of" these intrusions and not because of them. It concludes: "we have seen nothing that has induced envy of the position of other systems and much that has led us to prefer the British."[106]

We do not always appreciate how unusual this British model is. The European University Association recently found that English institutions have substantially more autonomy than those on the Continent.[107] In the United States, state universities also operate within parameters set by state governments. There are considerable powers accruing to central management of the university on admissions, for example, which in their English equivalents may be undertaken by individual faculties.

The Robbins report examines different aspects of autonomy in some detail. It maintains that institutions must be free of political intervention on who they appoint, what they teach and how they

106 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 230.

107 European Universities Association, *University Autonomy in Europe II*, 2011.

choose to develop. It also states that institutions must be free to choose who they teach – yet with the important caveat that "the selection of students should not only be fair, but also that they should be seen to be fair".

This latter freedom has been subject to attempted political incursions in the recent past – Gordon Brown wading in on Oxford's decision not to offer a place to Laura Spence was a notable case in point. We still have some way to go before we achieve anything like fully equitable access to our universities based on talent and potential and hence merit. But we should not try to get there by poking our noses into decisions about individual students.

We agree with Robbins. The greatest strength of our university sector is its autonomy. And as he notes: "Where co-ordination is necessary, there are means to achieve it that do not involve compulsion".[108]

Nonetheless, as this quotation implies, Robbins clearly saw the need for a strategic co-ordination function. One example is that "In a world in which resources are limited it is neither sensible nor feasible that every centre should be entitled to all kinds of development expenditure".[109]

Indeed he went further, saying explicitly: "Public policy does not necessarily involve the development of all institutions of higher education at an equal pace. There must be selection." This is classic Robbins. While he is against the idea of institutions being "frozen into established hierarchies",[110] he is not afraid of embracing excellence, wherever it is found.

108 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 237.

109 Ibid., 233.

110 Ibid., 9.

But if the state has a role to play in co-ordinating the sector – without trampling on its freedoms – where should universities sit in government? At the time the Robbins committee deliberated, they were directly funded out of the Treasury via the UGC. This arrangement was coming to an end. What should replace it?

Robbins devotes considerable time to exploring the various options. In doing so his committee were conscious that universities were not only about education "but also the advancement and preservation of knowledge". One "radical" proposal put before the committee was that

> *a Secretary of State for Education who would assume responsibility both for the Grants Commission and for those functions at present exercised by the Minister of Education. This would mean that, in England and Wales, the whole field not only of higher but of school education would be consolidated under one control.*[111]

The committee conceded that there were "weighty arguments in favour of this solution". The main points were similar to those sometimes revisited today. Putting schools, colleges and universities together in one place would allow "a unified survey of educational problems in all their aspects". There could be a "sense of common purpose" throughout the system. The ideal was that "the humblest primary school would feel engaged upon a common enterprise with the most eminent of the universities."[112] And meanwhile ministers could take the long view.

However, having reviewed the evidence, Robbins firmly rejected such a move, because he felt strongly that schools and universities were "fundamentally different institutions".

111 Ibid., 248.

112 Ibid., 248.

Firstly, "The methods and problems of higher education, especially in the senior reaches, differ considerably from the methods and problems of education in the schools; and we think that a proper articulation of the machinery of government should recognise these differences."

Secondly "The co-ordination of autonomous institutions through grants committees involves administrative methods very different from those required elsewhere in the educational system."

And finally "the business of the main institutions of higher learning is not only education: it is also the advancement and preservation of knowledge."[113]

Instead Robbins called for a new Department for Arts and Science, with knowledge at its centre. His argument was that the institutions involved were all autonomous and it was right to bring them together in a department where respect for that autonomy was central to the culture.

However, this was one aspect of the report where he did not get his way. Shortly after it was published the new Department of Education and Science was established (though very briefly with two permanent secretaries). It remained in existence for nearly 30 years.

A leader column in *The Times* three years after the report noted: "He [Robbins] may find rueful satisfaction now that one of the main departures from his recommendations, the decision to lump universities, schools, the arts, and scientific research under one Minister, is not working out well in the opinion of many interests which feel neglected."[114] One reason for Robbins' frustration was

113 Ibid., 249.

114 *The Times*, 25 April 1966.

that despite universities and schools being in one department, Secretaries of State for Education "have quite failed to curb the influence of most universities south of the border as regards specialisation in schools."[115]

And in his autobiography, published nearly a decade after the report came out, he identified this as one of the recommendations which he still felt particularly strongly about. "I still think that it would be a healthier state of affairs if the position of the autonomous sector of higher education were represented in Cabinet discussions by an independent minister advised by an independent department."[116]

Now science, protected from interference by the Haldane Principle, is linked to universities, with the same minister responsible. And in the Business Department they are part of a culture which understands science is to be supported not directed. We are as close to Robbins' vision for the machinery of Government as we have ever been.

115 Lionel Robbins, *Higher Education Revisited*, 95-96.

116 Lord Robbins, *Autobiography of an Economist*, 1971, 280.

CONCLUSION

The Robbins report is rich in evidence, argument, and insights. It has only been possible to look at a few key themes but they still strike a chord today.

Robbins is associated above all with an argument for the growth of higher education. We have seen that he rests this case not on manpower planning but on his principle that "courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so."[117] This put the aspirations of the student for more education centre stage. This approach may go back to his training as a neo-classical economist sceptical of central plans. His principle gets traction because of two key trends – demographic and educational. There was an upward trend in the number of young people (due to the long baby boom from 1945 to 1965) reinforced by the particular bubble in the birth rate immediately after the war, which peaked in 1947.

The demographic backdrop is very different today because of the fall in the number of babies born in the 1990s, reducing the number of young people this decade. However, looking ahead to the 2020s, we can see the increase in the number of births since the turn of the century feeding through into more young people. Those pressures have already been felt in our nurseries and primary schools.

The second trend is educational – the Butler reforms were raising educational attainment. There is a similar trend today with bold education reforms raising standards in our secondary schools, together with the increase in the age of compulsory education or training to 18. These can be expected to increase the proportion of

117 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education*, 1963, 8.

young people who become eligible for higher education. Robbins observed that "every increase of educational opportunity at one level leads almost at once to a demand for more opportunity at a higher level."[118]

The second strong theme in Robbins' report is the importance of teaching. He argues that the prestige and rewards for research are eroding the commitment to teaching. He thinks the lecture is over-rated as a form of teaching and favours more interactive learning in classes – fifty years ahead of the advocates of MOOCs (massive open online courses), who say it enables you to "flip the class" away from the "sage on the stage" model. Then the lecture would be "something of an occasion".[119] He wants to see "the regular and systematic setting and returning of written work, as providing the student with a focus of attention in arranging his studies."[120]

These are exactly the issues still debated today by academic staff and by students themselves. Our reforms are beginning to achieve a change in the culture of higher education institutions. Teaching and academic feedback are increasingly moving centre stage where they belong.

Meanwhile the world is having its Robbins moment. Many developing countries have extraordinary ambitions to expand the number of people entering higher education, and at a great pace. British institutions are well-placed to help, and it is fortuitous that we now have MOOCs to help achieve these ambitions. The jury is still out on whether there will be one or two dominant platforms or whether there will be several diverse names. In either case, it is important that we now have our own distinctive British offering,

118 Ibid., 101.

119 Ibid., 187.

120 Ibid., 188.

Futurelearn, with courses from many of our universities and support from some our most famous cultural institutions.

Across the higher education system, institutions are using technology in innovative ways. Yet conventional universities no longer hold all the cards on how the higher education market develops. Although MOOCs are still at a relatively early stage, they are evolving fast and may have the potential to tackle some particular challenges – such as an apparent mismatch between the supply and demand for high-level computer skills. Employers currently say they cannot find the skills they need yet computer science graduates find it relatively hard to find graduate-level work.

Indeed MOOCs and other online initiatives could step up to meet many different skills challenges. Lord Robbins would have understood this, for the Robbins report heralded television as having "considerable potential value" as a learning tool. A few years later, the Open University began broadcasting on the BBC.

The third theme we have identified is also a debate which resonates today – specialisation versus breadth. Robbins feared that over-specialisation at A-level and at university was driving the clash between the two cultures. Indeed he attributed the clash to defects in our education system. The good news here is that our evidence shows more students are doing a wider range of A-levels and the EBacc is promoting breadth of knowledge in key disciplines. The renewed involvement of universities in A-levels is a great opportunity to reinforce these trends. Robbins saw the taught masters as the key moment when students could really dig deep and acquire specialised knowledge and understanding. This is more the American model and it is striking how British people studying in the United States often cite this as a key attraction. We can hope to see a revival of the "liberal arts" degree, including sciences of course, as a popular choice. With Hefce, we will be increasing funding support for taught masters programmes to

try to lower some of the barriers to entering them for less affluent students – we do see this as the new frontier in social mobility.

Everything does of course have to be paid for. The mechanics of nationwide student grants had been created after the Anderson report in 1960. Robbins was able to take this mechanism and assume it would fund expansion of student support. Anderson said that everyone with a place should get a grant; Robbins said that everyone able to go to university should have a place. And this was before one adds in the cost to universities of educating their students. To pay for all this Robbins toyed with the idea of loans repayable as a percentage of future earnings. He decided not to go down this route as he was afraid that positive attitudes to higher education were not yet sufficiently widespread, especially amongst young women. Looking back he increasingly came to regret his caution. Eventually after over forty years, we have ended up with a financing model very close to the one Robbins really preferred. One might conclude that on this issue all three main political parties whilst in government have followed the logic of the remark attributed to Churchill about Americans, that they "eventually do the right thing, but only after first exhausting every other possibility."

It is 50 years since Lord Robbins published his ground-breaking report on the key aims and principles for the future of Higher Education. The report has shaped the policies of successive governments since 1963.

In this pamphlet, the Minister for Universities and Science, the Rt Hon. David Willetts MP, explores how the Robbins Report influences Government policy today. Willetts sets out his vision for the Higher Education system. Demographic pressures and improved education standards in schools are likely to lead to further expansion of higher education, which a new sustainable and fair funding model enables. Willetts outlines reforms to ensure that high-quality and innovative teaching sits at the heart of what universities offer.

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