**Higher education policy making: hope, prejudice and wishful thinking**

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Thank you very much for inviting me to contribute to this prestigious series of lectures. That is a great honour. I would also like to thank the University for enabling me to address this question in a way that I hope you will not think it self-indulgent, but which may, on reflection, seem like a bit of an anecdotal ramble across a number of unrelated issues. What binds this altogether is my deep belief that while to hold opinions without evidence is entirely human, and we all do it, to base policies on belief without evidence -- and often in the face of conflicting evidence -- is irresponsible in the extreme, and worse.

I want to begin with a quote from somebody who ought to have known what he was talking about -- Sir Howard Newby when he was chief executive of HEFCE. **[Slide]** If what he meant by this was that realistically, practical and political considerations have to be taken into account in making policies then that is undoubtedly right. Unfortunately though, the reality goes well beyond that, to the extent that sometimes evidence is a distant consideration as policies are developed. It isn't just policies, politicians and policymaking. One of the sobering things I have come to realise -- perhaps late and naïvely you may think, those of you who have been in the academic profession in a way that I have not -- is the way that academics take positions and express opinions on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence -- sometimes in the face of clear evidence to the contrary -- and without any good grounding for what they say. They believe things because they choose to believe them.

In the past seven years since I began working at HEPI I have encountered numerous examples of this, but today in the time available I will limit myself **[Slide]** to examples drawn from the report that we produced on male and female participation and progression in higher education, last year; on the debate and some of the policies around the question of fair access; and some of the discussion around the question of noncompletion and dropout.

Last summer HEPI produced a report on male and female participation in higher education. It was a low key, understated report. Scholarly even. I can say that myself because I was not the author -- that was John Thomson, formerly chief analyst HEFCE, and if anybody knows him they will know that if there is anybody who is rigorous and professional in their use of and interpretation of statistics that is John Thomson. Many is the time, to my frustration, that John has stopped me from drawing conclusions or making assertions because, although it seemed obvious from the data, what was obvious was not good enough for him.

We looked at many different dimensions of the participation and progression of men and women in higher education, and I will describe some of the main findings of the report and then discuss some of the reactions.

**[Slide]** The main top-level finding is well known. There is a substantial and growing gap between the participation of males and females in higher education. This chart shows the absolute numbers, and as you will see there are roughly 60,000 more first year female undergraduates than male. **[Slide]** That is all the more remarkable bearing in mind the fact that there are actually significantly more young males in the population than females. That is one of the strange but true facts that I encountered in the course of this work. So with more males in the population, if there were parity in participation, you'd expect more males in higher education. So it is all the more remarkable that there are so many more females.

Why does this matter? Well, I think it matters no less than the uneven participation by social class. There are people missing out on the undoubted advantages that higher education brings, and we should be concerned about that alone. Added to that are concerns about the emergence of an undereducated and underprivileged underclass with all the social problems that could bring. And if, as the OECD predicts, the time is not far off as things are going at present that males account for only 30% of university graduates, then that will give rise to a whole host of issues - in the workplace, in the registry office as women struggle to find spouses of the same educational status as themselves, and in society as a whole. Well before we began this work, I was struck forcibly at a conference I attended at the tale told by an American researcher who had run focus groups of black women on campus and she told of their fury at black American males whose absence from university education had led to a situation where, they said, they were unable to form relationships with people from their own backgrounds and their own levels of education.

**[Slide]** Some people have found this finding uncomfortable. Here is a typical "Ah yes but" response. The proposition here is that although females may be a majority in higher education, they remain underprivileged and disadvantaged because they go to low status universities, study low status subjects and so on. In the words of this quote "women's participation is limited to the bottom of a hierarchical continuum". And to be honest, if this were the case, it would put an important gloss on the top-level finding, and some of the policy concerns that that gives rise to

So we looked more widely, at every aspect of higher education participation and progression that there were good data for.

**[Slide]** For example, we looked at this question of women attending only lower status universities -- the bottom of the hierarchical continuum, to use the words in the previous quote. That is just not so. Incidentally, in most of the data we show participation rates, rather than absolute numbers or the proportions of the student population represented by males and females, in order to take account of the different population sizes. We found that the participation of women was very much higher than that of men in pretty well every category of institution, including Russell and 94 Group universities. Interestingly, other than in Oxbridge where the participation rates were broadly similar, the type of institution where men came closest to matching women was in further education colleges, which arguably are the least prestigious institutions.

**[Slide]** We looked at participation by gender and mode, and as you will see women have higher participation than men in both full-time and part-time. **[Slide]** We looked at young and mature participation, and we found that there was substantially higher participation by women of all ages. **[Slide]** We looked at what happened to them once they were in University, and found that males dropped out significantly more than females and that they got significantly worse degree classes -- other, interestingly, than first-class degrees, and that is something worth investigating further. But looking at all good degrees women did better, looking at lower seconds and thirds men did worse.

**[Slide]** One of the things that has been said is that there are significant subject differences, and that this works against women. And it is true, there are subject differences, though they are not as great as you might think, and they are not all in one direction.

So we looked pretty comprehensively, and there is little argument to be had with the evidence -- one amusing PS is that I was taken to task for not saying what I meant by "evidence". Well, let me just say that I think that hard statistical data, taken from a database of millions (the HESA data), and rigorously analysed is pretty solid evidence.

We were looking at participation and progression in higher education. That is where our expertise lies, and we don't know very much about school level education. But as with so much that we come across in higher education, issues that arise in higher education are actually issues that develop in school. **[Slide]** Differential achievement at school is what gives rise to differential achievements into and through higher education. And we looked a little at some of the possible reasons for the relatively poor performance of boys in school -- not our research, but the research of others. I have not time now to speculate about this, but one of the most striking findings was that at GCSE boys did significantly worse than girls in maths and science -- subjects where boys had traditionally done well -- yet in the PISA tests administered by the OECD just weeks apart from the GCSE exams boys did significantly better than girls in science and no less well in mathematics. And this year, when coursework has been dropped from GCSE Maths, the performance of boys suddenly improved. It would not be surprising if differential performance was somehow related to teaching styles and the nature of examinations. But as I say, we were not qualified to go into these questions and so passed them by.

**[Slide]** But perhaps anyway it is futile to look at things like GCSEs and so on for the reason for these differences when the underperformance of boys is a worldwide phenomenon, and affects countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia and Iceland. It could be that girls really are cleverer than boys, or that there is something that has happened pretty well simultaneously around the world that impacts on these questions.

What was the reaction to our report? I have to say that we received more reaction to this report than to any other -- often more important -- reports that we have produced. Mothers and fathers contacted us, in despair over the performance of their sons, compared to their daughters. We had communication from people who could only be described as male chauvinist pigs. And we also had contact from women with clearly a deep hatred of men, who took this hatred out on me personally, and I will come back to that. Most newspapers covered the report and the issues, and by and large quite seriously and thoughtfully. The Sun, for example **[Slide]**

**[Slide]** But beneath the tongue-in-cheek headline, even the Sun managed a serious and sensible comment

**[Slide]** In some people our report obviously touched a nerve, and gave rise to emotional outpourings that a psychologist would have a field day with. This chap -- for, yes, it was a chap -- clearly has some kind of obsessional problems.

But the response that I want to focus on is that of a small number of academics, whose reactions were, quite honestly, astonishing and shocking . **[Slide]** Here is someone called Professor X, with her scholarly criticism. **[click]** Castration anxieties -- a suggestion that caused my wife great concern, as well as surprise. Greedy, rapacious, too big women -- honestly, where did all this come from? What did I do to deserve this, and is this saying more about the author of the comments than about the author of the report?

**[click]** And here is another, which suggests that the report is part of a campaign and that the report says things that it doesn't even touch upon -- that "everything is fine with young women". More perniciously, it claims to identify "an implicit argument", and having created a straw person it goes on to say that it is easy to move from that position -- one that is not taken by the report which does not actually take any position other than to present facts -- to move from that inferred position to a fascist standpoint. **[click]** And then, we're back to things like "panic stricken masculinity". As I say, what did we do to deserve this?

**[Slide]** And here is someone who describes our report as "unhelpful". But what we were doing was reporting on male and female participation. It is true as it turns out that this research was indeed unhelpful to people who had perhaps spent their lives arguing that women were disadvantaged in all conceivable respects, but then we don't set out in our reports to be helpful to any particular point of view.

And, presumably, without having read our report, she says that we ignore the gender balance on courses and asserts that men tend to have a higher concentration in courses with high pay packets waiting for them. Well, we didn't ignore the question of subject of study, as I have already shown, and actually women are rather well represented in some high prestige courses and less well represented in others. And while on the question of employment after graduation, it is true that we found that men who were in work tended to have jobs that paid more than women on average. We also found that men had higher rates of unemployment and were more likely to be in non-graduate jobs, if they were employed.

Finally, is the suggestion that our report ignores the general culture of masculinity in the academy. Well, it's true that we did ignore that. Or rather we didn't ignore it but we didn't study it. Let me repeat, and be quite clear, there are lots of things that our report didn't study. We were not reviewing the experience of males and females in society more widely, nor the academic workforce, nor the employment market, nor the higher mortality rates of men nor whether the retirement rules discriminate against men.It was about the participation of young people in higher education.

**[Slide]** And here we are back to moral panic once again, **[click]**and the suggestion that in producing this report we are fighting some kind of a sex war -- where do they get these ideas? if you read the report you read something that is matter-of-fact -- as I say, scholarly even -- and pretty low key, without making any general statements about the position of men and women in society, or in universities even. We have previously written about the poor performance of working-class pupils in terms of University entrance and progression, without being accused of class war by the middle classes or of moral panic. What is it with these people?

**[click]** The reason I'm sharing this quote is because of the last point, which repeats the statement that women are concentrated in low status universities -- in this case the "bottom 10". Here, some very precise numbers are produced to support the claim that women are disadvantaged -- but even these numbers, even if they were right, don't actually support such an argument (you will see that even on this assertion women are not in a minority even in the so called top universities -- but I just want to focus a moment on the numbers quoted and the influence they have had. **[Slide]** 18 months ago they gave rise to a flurry of articles in the Times Higher. Here is a quote from an article by Professor AA referring in turn to an article by Professor BB. **[click]** I'm afraid that what we have here is something that is all too common in the academic world -- unchecked citations, perpetuating errors or downright falsehoods. These are quite explicit in the statement that women are "concentrated" in the "bottom 10" institutions. However, as we have seen already even at Oxford and Cambridge the participation of women equals that of men, and in the Russell group more generally it far outstrips that of men. **[Slide]** The work that these are citing is a book by Professor Z, in which she asserted that just half the students in "top 10" institutions are women and 65% of students in "bottom 10" universities are women. And of course we are back to ‘moral panic’ again. Putting on one side the repugnance that many may feel at this apparent endorsement of the Times’ crude ranking of universities into top 10 and bottom 10, the numbers are just wrong. In order to achieve these figures what the author did was simply to average the percentages of women in each of the top 10 and then the bottom 10 universities. She added it up and then averaged the percentages! I don't need labor this, but here is a simplified example of how she managed to get the figure. **[Slide]** Done correctly, the proportion of women in the "top 10" universities would have been 53.3% and that of men 46.7%. And considering that men are in the majority in the young population, this represents a pretty impressive outperformance of males by females, even in the top 10 institutions.

It remains the case, of course, that females are in an even greater majority in the "bottom 10" institutions. But that is a long way from saying that they are "concentrated only in the bottom 10 institutions", as has been said. And if you think about it, it is a pretty peculiar argument to say that although men underperform in the "top" universities, because they underperform by even more in the "bottom" universities that somehow represents a disadvantage for women. The suggestion of the ghettoization of women in not very good universities is pure fiction

But the general concern I have, and why I have dwelt on this, is to address the question of academics in positions of authority in universities ignoring evidence -- making up their evidence even -- engaging in frankly extraordinary personal abuse and attacks -- remember we have had accusations of castration anxieties, moral panic, spreading sex warfare, masculinity panics and emasculation -- because they see a body of evidence that is being assembled and presented undermining their Zeitgeist and their long and fondly held beliefs. These are people who are teaching our youngsters. Concern with truth, objectivity, weighing evidence and coming to conclusions on the basis of evidence. I fear that these are scholarly virtues that are not being transmitted to their students. Indeed, as I have shown, even the Sun managed a more rational discussion of the issues.

Howard Newby's observation that it is unrealistic to expect policy to be determined by evidence ought not to apply to academic endeavor. One of the sobering things I've discovered is how even academics can put belief and opinion above facts, evidence and analysis when the former are offended by the latter. We shouldn’t be surprised perhaps – Ben Goldacre’s Bad Science article in the Guardian reminds us of this every week.

Moving on then, just a short digression, but something that I want to share with you because I think it is stunning, is the fact that whether you go to University is significantly determined by the month in which you are born. It is now fairly well known that August-born children perform least well at school, and that September-born children perform best. **[Slide]** As you'll see from this chart, that difference in performance continues right the way through school and impacts on admission to higher education. We have not looked at whether it impacts performance within higher education. And the reason for this is fairly clear as well -- rather rigid admission and progression arrangements, that require pupils to enter school as rising fives and require them to move on up each year whether they are ready or not. The United States and other countries that are more flexible in this respect do not have any such pattern, and have a random distribution of students' month of birth. In Scotland, that is as inflexible as England, but has a different academic year start date, there is a similar pattern, but the disadvantage is not with the August born, but those born in January and February. You would have thought that the answer was fairly straightforward -- to allow greater flexibility in when pupils start school and not to require them to move on until they are ready to do so. But for whatever reason, the government has resisted this. The Rose review of primary education instead has proposed that four-year-olds should be able to bring forward their entry into the school system, presumably on the basis that the problem for the August born is that they have less schooling in their first year than the September born -- something for which as far as I know there is absolutely no evidence. As it is, something like 12,000 young people fail each year to get University simply because of the accident of the month in which they are born, and that will continue.

The next issue that I want to discuss this evening concerns the issue of fair access -- which has come to mean the admission of young people from poor backgrounds to the universities with the most demanding entry requirements -- basically, the elite universities. **[Slide]** As you will see from this slide, there is a very large disparity, with Oxford and Cambridge, for example, admitting only about one third of the proportion of students from poor backgrounds that the University system as a whole admits. Some people suggest that this doesn't matter, but really it does. **[Slide]** It is not to diminish the performance and achievements of the non-elite universities to recognize that attendance at an elite university can impact very greatly on the life chances of those who go to these universities.

This disparity has been seized on by politicians -- at the very highest level -- **[Slide]** the most celebrated example a few years ago being Gordon Brown and the Laura Spence affair -- an embarrassment to him subsequently. It was reignited 18 months ago in what was effectively a public shouting match between the then Secretary of State and various grandees from Oxford and Cambridge.

**[Slide]** **[Slide]** **[Slide]**

Now, I cannot believe that the politicians really believe that Oxford and Cambridge -- and the other elite universities -- are socially biased in their admissions decisions. **[Slide]** Nor too do I believe that they really do not understand that the basic problem is that elite universities, by definition, set high admissions requirements, and that relatively few pupils from the poorest backgrounds achieve those standards. Three A grades at A level is the typical requirement for these universities, and last year fewer than 200 pupils receiving free school meals gained three grade As.

Last year, in the course of work we were doing on future demand for higher education, we obtained from the Department for Children Schools and Families information about the number of pupils with GCSEs going on to obtain a level 3 qualification of any sort. The facts are striking and had not previously been published. **[Slide]** You will see from this table that nearly 10% of pupils with top GCSEs just drop out of the education system completely and fail to obtain any further qualifications -- and as many as 35% of those with seven GCSEs fail to progress. These are the brightest children aged 16, and really ought to be expected to stay on in education and progress to University. And there is other research -- by the Sutton Trust and others -- that suggests that these high achieving pupils who fail to go any further are predominantly from poor backgrounds. **[Slide]** And this of course is reflected in A level achievement, and so we shouldn't be surprised that those universities with the most demanding entry requirements -- the left of the chart -- predominantly recruit from the higher social groups -- the blue bars.

**[Slide]** And yet, these elite universities are their own worst enemies to some extent. They insist that the only criterion for admission they are interested in is academic potential -- and that the only basis on which they differentiate between two candidates is by assessing which one is most likely to succeed academically. And they run a mile at any suggestion of social engineering. But it does not have to be like that. Some pretty good universities outside this country are quite explicit that what they engage in is social engineering. **[Slide]** Here is a quote from the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard, where they're quite clear that academic criteria have their place, but that beyond an academic threshold what they're looking to achieve is as good a balance in their student populations as they can. Yes, they engage unashamedly in social engineering.

And to be fair, of course, whatever they say, universities here understand the issue, and many are keen to widen their intakes. But instead of coming out as with Princeton and Harvard and announcing that they will explicitly seek to engineer socially, they have been looking for other means of achieving the same ends, while maintaining the line that they remain committed to selection only on the basis of academic potential. **[Slide]** One mechanism that is becoming increasingly common is to take "contextual" information into account in deciding to whom to make offers. And in particular, taking account of the track record of the school which the applicant attends. The theory here is that someone who gets a certain number of A levels from a poor performing school has done so against the odds, and therefore is likely to perform better at University than someone else with the same A level grades from a school with a good track record. **[click]** The problem with this is that the facts do not bear this out. The definitive work on this was done at HEFCE, which concluded that pupils from poorly performing schools did not do better at University than those with equivalent A levels from better performing schools -- in fact if anything, the contrary. That was a surprise to them because it seemed a reasonable assumption that they would, and that was the hypothesis that they set out to demonstrate. **[Slide]** However, in the context of this work they also found that pupils from independent schools did worse at University than pupils from local authority schools with equivalent A levels. So there is a school type effect, but not a school performance effect. That fact has confounded a number of other studies that purport to show a school performance effect, but which fail to allow for differences in performance between independent and local authority schools

That has not stopped people who should know better from ignoring the evidence and continuing to claim that students from poor performing schools will perform better at University, and that has not either stopped official bodies like the Schwartz committee and the National Council on Educational Excellence from repeating the assertion; and a number of universities -- most well-known recently Durham and Bristol -- from introducing specific policies, and in the case of Durham a precise formula, for taking account of school performance. They do this because they wish to maintain the policy of taking only academic criteria into account. Why they have not pursued the evidence and given preferential treatment to pupils from state schools over independent -- which would be consistent with a policy of basing admissions purely on academic criteria -- is a mystery. Actually of course it isn't such a mystery. It is for the same reason they're reluctant to espouse social engineering -- like politicians and others, they are terrified of the Daily Mail and the assault on middle-class parents that would be claimed if they adopt this policy.

**[Slide]** And just to add to the equation and the confusion, is the widely and strongly held view that A levels are anyway a poor predictor of success in higher education. **[Slide]** That just isn't so, as you'll see from this analysis of A-level grades and degree class. It shows the probability of somebody with 24 A level points [under the old system] obtaining a higher degree class than a student with a different number of A-level points.

Finally on this question, I want to touch on the question of bursaries -- a topic on which HEPI produced report a few months ago. Our conclusion was that the present bursary arrangements are dysfunctional, leading to students with the same needs receiving very different amounts of support depending on which University they go to -- students attending those universities with the most students from poor backgrounds receiving the least. That might be justifiable if the higher bursaries available at the most selective universities attracted more students from poor backgrounds and led to a better social mix. [**get report**] That was part of the rationale for the present bursary arrangements. **[Slide]** And OFFA published some research late last year that purported to show that that indeed is what was happening. **[click]** The basis for this claim was a survey that asked students their attitudes, and hypothetical questions about what they might have done without bursaries. But as we know from other research, for example on attitudes to debt, asking students their attitudes is no substitute for observing what they actually do, which is often quite different from what they say they would have done. And so it turns out in the case of bursaries. **[click]**  The existence of bursaries has had absolutely no impact on the attendance of poor students at the most demanding universities. The evidential basis for the current bursary arrangements is flimsy. In fact, the current bursaries policy is being pursued and defended in the face of the evidence. Again, those who make policy make policy because of what they believe even when the evidence points in a different direction.

Finally on my ramble around my hobbyhorses I want to look at the way that non-completion or drop out is treated. **[Slide]** I can summarize the ways that dropout is regarded as the Daily Mail issue where dropout is sensationalized as a way of beating universities in general, but in particular new universities, around the head; the frightened politician issue, who from on high, and no doubt in response to the Daily Mail, requires universities to "bear down on noncompletion", as David Blunkett did when he was Secretary of State; and the muddled sociologist issue, where no doubt well-meaning sociologists describe dropout as a social construct and insist that there is nothing wrong with it.

**[Slide]** Actually, our record on dropout is pretty good in this country. Given that there will always be students who drop out -- if for no other reason than that students die, go mad, find that University is not for them or for whatever reason -- our record is not bad at all.

And yes, it is true that different universities have very different dropout rates. **[Slide]** You will see from this graph that there are some universities with less than 5% dropout and a very small number with up to 40% dropout. But so, also, universities vary greatly in the numbers of students they have from poor backgrounds **[Slide]**  -- and as we have already discussed, because of differential achievement of schools, students from poor backgrounds tend to be those with the poorest school qualifications. So these universities with the highest dropout rates coincide closely with the universities that are most active in widening participation. **[Slide]** And we know also -- again from the HESA records -- that there is a more or less linear relationship between prior educational achievement and likelihood of dropping out. Older students dropout more than younger students and those with the best prior achievement drop out less than those with the poorest prior achievement. You will see that clearly in this graph, which as I say, shows a more or less linear relationship. Young pupils who go to Cambridge drop out almost not at all, and mature students with no prior qualifications are very much more likely to dropout. So the the answer to the frightened politician is, yes of course we can bear down on noncompletion. And the way of doing that is by raising entry requirements and narrowing participation. Is that what they want? We have to be honest about this -- and the political posturing in the face of the evidence is dishonest.

**[Slide]** Finally, we have the muddled sociologists, who believe, and here they are repeating an orthodoxy, that there is nothing wrong with dropping out if I only we would see it as a positive rather than as a negative.

Quite honestly, that is patronizing and it is enormously damaging to the interests of those whom they think they are supporting. Some wonderful work by the Wider Benefits of Learning Group has established that in almost all respects dropping out does you no good at all. They looked at things like **[Slide]** mental health, **[Slide]**  physical health, **[Slide]** parenting, **[Slide]** social attitudes here represented by likelihood of voting, but also attitudes to gender and race equality. In pretty well all respects people who drop out are no better off than people who didn't go to university at all, and often actually worse off. It's a dangerous fiction that dropping out doesn't matter. It does, and we should be doing all we can to help young people succeed.

**[Slide]** And in this context, and finally, let me just refer to some research published last year by HEFCE, which has effectively been buried, and which I've never seen referred to, presumably because it offends the government's – and now also the Tory Party’s - orthodoxy that part-time higher education is the future and we should be focusing in future on that [and I am cynical enough to think that they believe that because part-time higher education of course is much cheaper for the government because it carries no loan for tuition or maintenance]. The HEFCE researchers took the full cohort of part-time students who entered University in 1998, and examined what had become of them 12 years later. Putting on one side OU students, of those who had declared that their aim was a bachelors degree, 59% had left University without a qualification 12 years later. That, of course, is not to belittle the importance or the value of part-time higher education -- and of course it could be that this is an argument for more generous support arrangements for such students -- but those who make policy pronouncements -- and those who describe noncompeters as "true lifelong learners" because they can get back University part-time -- had better be aware of the implications.

So, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience, and thank you for giving me the honour of listening to me this evening. As you can tell, this is a subject that I care deeply about. This is why I established HEPI in 2002. The belief that good policymaking requires good evidence -- and dismay at the prejudice, wishful thinking and sometimes, I'm afraid, downright dishonesty that permeates so much of public -- and academic -- life -- informs and motivates us and the way we work. I will be happy to take any points that you may have.