House of Commons Seminar: 24th February, 2009

Fair Access Revisited

Bahram Bekhradnia (Chair):
Ladies and gentlemen,

We shouldn't let this moment pass without reference to the sad death of Ron Dearing last Thursday. We at HEPI owe a special debt to Ron, who was our first Chairman - our initial success was due to the enormous respect with which he was regarded and also, personally, to his calm wisdom and experience. He was a great bridge-builder. He was, in the very best sense of the word, a great civil servant, and always able to find common ground where none was apparently available. Occasionally, I have to say, he was a little uncomfortable to chair a think tank that sometimes produced material that some people found objectionable, but he was uncompromising in his defence of our integrity. I remember on one occasion he telephoned a Minister of State for Higher Education and gave her a dressing down for attempting, through her civil servants, to suppress one of our reports.

Some of you who didn't know Ron Dearing might have read yesterday's obituary in the Guardian and wondered what all the fuss was about. Well, let me tell you that the Guardian only gave a very partial account - it didn't even begin to give an impression of the warmth and humanity of the man, which made both men and women absolutely love him. It was just a dry chronology of some of the posts that he held, and it even left out one of his greatest achievements when, as the first Chairman of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, he steered the sector through the very difficult time of the abolition of the binary line and the creation of a new, unified system. Nor, inevitably, did it cover the staggering range of his passions. Even up to a few weeks ago he was pressing in the Lords for the creation of a new kind of technical institute, and some of us are due to attend an event in the Lords today on languages which he was due to host.

Anyway, as Ron once said to me after the passing of another distinguished colleague, "Let that not derail the show" - which struck me as being a slightly odd metaphor at the time – but as he also used to say to me regularly, "Come on Bahram, let's have some fun." He loved his work.

Moving on to today's business, I welcome all of you to this second in our fifth series of House of Commons breakfast seminars - this series made possible by the generous support of Blackboard. The topic for today is 'Fair Access Revisited'. Some of us were concerned that, during last summer, the topic had become a shouting match between the Government and the selective universities. Now, things have calmed down a bit, thank God, and this seminar provides, perhaps, an opportunity to take a calm and dispassionate look at the issue.

We have three very distinguished speakers: Sir Martin Harris, the first and so far the only Director of the Office for Fair Access; Malcolm Grant, the Chair of the Russell Group; and Michael Driscoll, the former Chair of Million Plus. Our sponsors,

Blackboard, most of you will know well because most of your universities run Blackboard software or, as I said last time, Blackboard runs most of your universities.

Just a word about the rules of engagement - most of you have been before, you'll know them well - we have 15 minutes or so of brief introduction apiece from the three speakers, then open discussion, and around 10.15 we'll close. It's Chatham House rules today - we have journalists present, but the rules of Chatham House are that if they want to quote you, they will get in touch with you directly.

So, with that, let's have some fun.

Sir Martin Harris:
Thank you, Bahram. I'm not sure I can provide 'fun', but I wonder if I might start by echoing Bahram's words about Ron Dearing. I expect I'm by no means the only person in this room to whom he was a wonderful mentor in many ways over many years, and I share that sense of loss. I'd also like to thank you for inviting me, Bahram, because it gives me an excuse not to talk about the thing that actually preoccupies me at the moment, which is being Chairman of the Universities Superannuation Scheme - in the last half hour, as we've been congregating, colleagues have chosen to talk to me about that rather than the topic before us today!

I would like to set the scene that I'm sure my two colleagues will take forward. To look back at how the concept of fair access evolved - fair access in the sense intended by the legislation which seems to have moved calmly into history. There's a different sense in which it's currently in use (in this gathering today). I'll muse a little bit about the interesting semantic shift which has taken place in the relatively short time since the Act was passed.

It's hard now to recall just how intense the party political controversy was over the introduction of so-called variable fees, the £3,000 fee. I've no intention to re-visit that, except to remember how that party maelstrom influenced the form of the legislation within which the Office for Fair Access operates. But I will remind you of certain strands in the argument, so that you can decide for yourselves whether the strands that were absolutely vital then are still the strands that are of great importance now.

First and foremost - and I think this would still be common ground - it was seen, especially among MPs, as vital not to disadvantage poorer students. In introducing higher fees, the number one priority was to make sure poorer students were not disadvantaged, and I take it that would still be uncontroversial. But it was also seen as vital, particularly by the Prime Minister, to establish an additional independent income stream for universities. That was a key part of the legislation. It was particularly strongly argued in the House of Lords that it was vital to protect university autonomy, and there was a specific requirement that there should be no more bureaucracy. Now, like it or not, all those things are in primary legislation and have affected the events that have taken place since. If the debate has moved on, the framework is still the same, and it is the one that I've just outlined for you.

OFFA's precise form was born out of this maelstrom. I'm not here to defend OFFA or even to argue that OFFA in its current form needs to exist. Indeed, right at the end

I'm going to argue that the way forward may be a different way, even though I fully understand why something like OFFA needed to be set up at the time the legislation was passed.

OFFA, as you know, requires universities from their own resources – and I will say that with those four words again - we initially required universities *from their own resources*, that is, their new resources, to ensure that no poor student received less than £3,000. The Government provided about £2,700 of that. The initial objective was to ensure that universities provided enough funding in the form of bursaries to top every poor student up to that £3,000 level. But - and this is the crucial bit and where the debate has tended to focus since - universities were also asked to add such other support as they felt able to, to supplement the resources available to poorer students. Most give at least £1,000 to the poorer students, and some give more, so there's a rather low legal minimum, and a much higher average in reality.

The biggest effort, said Charles Clarke at the time, was to come from "those with furthest to go" - we currently refer to them as selective universities. They were to make a bigger effort. Charles Clarke's view at the time was that universities should give a minimum of 10% of their new resources to bursaries and it would be better if those with furthest to go gave nearer 20%. In addition, there should be additional outreach where appropriate. That got muddled up then, in this absolute restriction on no more bureaucracy. At a time when reports to OFFA became mandatory, it was decided to do away with requiring an annual report from universities on their widening participation efforts in general. So we have now a bizarre situation where some widening participation initiatives are reported through their access agreements and others are not reported at all - we can't possibly compare two universities self-reporting their outreach activities, because there is no basis for comparison. I'm delighted to say that the sector has just agreed to reinstate annual reports on total widening participation efforts, which will include bursary efforts within that.

The bursary scheme exceeded everyone's expectations. 25% of universities' extra resources go immediately back to students in one form or another. About a quarter of this additional money is being spent from universities' own funds and at universities' own discretion. In other words, this is university money that is being spent on supporting students.

Student support, of course, is twofold, and this is often forgotten in the debate. The great majority of student support comes through the state funded system directly from DIUS. That amount can be varied politically at will and is more generous to the poorer students than it has been for decades. So there is a state system which underpins grants and loans to the poor, and a supplementary system organised by autonomous institutions from within their own autonomous resources. Sometimes the discourse merges or blurs those two. It is always open to the government of the day to declare that there is a minimum that is required for students of any given income and that is clearly a political decision. Additionally, it is for the universities to decide how much of their own resources to use in supplementary ways in their own particular context to help groups that they are particularly keen to help. So it's a misconception to think of bursaries as part of the state support arrangements for undergraduates.

There's no evidence at all, in my view, that any student is being deterred from applying to university because of deficient bursary arrangements. At OFFA we have found no evidence yet that the financial package on offer from a particular university influences choice of that university over another. All the evidence seems to show that students are still choosing their university on the criteria they've always used to choose a university – the location, the course - there's no evidence that financial differences make any difference. Indeed, I would go further still, and this may be more controversial - I think there's little evidence that any financial package at 18 makes very much difference to whether a young person goes into HE or not. I've been in this sector for 40-odd years and watched through very generous student support periods, very miserly student support periods, and the proportions who go into HE (assuming there are places - a debate for the next year or two) and the proportions from different social classes vary rather little, whether there's a generous support system or not.

My view is, you will have gathered, that the principal efforts to induce people to go into higher education need to be made much earlier in a student's trajectory through the education system. That's why OFFA in its present form may not be the appropriate mechanism to do that, assuming some future Government moves their efforts to widen participation and ensure fair access to the points where it really might make a difference.

I've talked to you about fair access as defined in the legislation - that universities should not refuse to admit students on financial grounds (and who, four or five years later, thinks there was ever the faintest chance that universities would turn students away on financial grounds?). That was the 'problem', and OFFA was the 'solution', in that view. Fair access now has come *not* to mean discrimination against students on financial grounds. No university ever intended to discriminate against students on financial grounds. There is a relatively generous state support system, there are bursaries tailored to meet local needs, and there is a major system of outreach by universities up and down the land. That problem is perceived to have gone away, because autonomous universities have tackled it in an extremely effective way.

Now, the question is (depending on who's posing it) why do some well-qualified young people not apply for selective universities, or why are they not admitted? What is nearly always meant these days by fair access is not what the legislation says, but why bright kids from working class backgrounds, poor kids who get good A Levels, don't go to the selective universities.

That has nothing to with the role of OFFA – the legislation is quite clear what OFFA is for, and it isn't that. I'm also going to leave on one side the much more interesting question of whether it is actually a good thing that all the brightest young people in our country should be guided towards 5, 10, 15, 20 - pick your number - universities to the exclusion of other institutions. There are those who take it for granted that the answer to that is 'Yes'. I'm simply going to leave that question in the air. If you think the answer is 'Yes', then how might you set about doing it? Well, all current evidence suggests that the choice of whether or not to go into HE at 18, or whether to choose a particular institution, is not determined primarily financially, least of all by the precise financial package available at that point. The money is not what motivates people. Their decisions are made for other reasons and often very much earlier than

at age 18. Choices are made, largely unconsciously, in families, among peer groups, and usually in 11-16 schools. There's a great deal of effort on outreach from universities into FE colleges and sixth form colleges. But many key decisions are made in aspirational terms (and more precisely in curricular terms) at the age of 14 in schools, at the point where ultimate university ambition may not be on anybody's agenda - not the young person's agenda and not the teachers' agenda.

The most important thing that will improve fair access in any sense you want to use the term is to discourage as many people as possible from leaving school at 16. That is the biggest single thing we can do to increase access. EMAs, for example, are intended to try to do that. Aspiration during 11-16, some would say perhaps even earlier, is absolutely fundamental. We need pastoral care and academic guidance at that point. I have a nephew who, because of advice he got at 14 in a perfectly normal 11-16 school in an English city, cannot now do at his sixth form college the subjects which would more likely lead him into one of the selective universities than the subjects that he's actually doing. That's because at 14 neither he nor his family nor his school had any conception that not doing certain sciences at 14 would preclude a whole set of options later on. Those are the kinds of things that have the effect that I'm talking about.

So my view is that, if you believe that increasing fair access in this second sense is important, it is not primarily a financial question, it is above all about advice and guidance and support in 11-16 schools, in managing the transition from an 11-16 school into post-16 education, and in making sure that universities' outreach is consistently based on working with young people at those ages. They must identify their academic aspirations and know the academic consequences of the choices they might make. If we are going to increase financial support for young people, I would put it to you that age 16-18 is where we need to focus attention, not later. That having been said, I'm not convinced that finance is the decisive factor at all. I think the issue is entirely about raising aspirations, making sure the right advice and guidance and the maximum possible encouragement is given. Universities have a role in that, of course they do. They already do all those things, but I'm not convinced that universities can or should be the principal agent for bringing about the changes in the secondary sector that I've tried to outline.

Professor Malcolm Grant:
Self-discipline obliges me to put my watch on the lectern and address it rather than the audience, but I will start by reinforcing one or two of the things that Martin said. It would be terribly dull if I agreed with him on everything, but what I do agree with is the enormous contribution that Ron Dearing made to higher education in this country. I was last night pondering this and trying to put Dearing's contribution alongside that of any Secretary of State for Education with whom I had had dealings over the past two or three decades, and the answer is clear. Dearing had that enduring, long-living, intellectual contribution to higher education that eludes Secretaries of State because they must work to much shorter deadlines and work within a much more volatile political environment. He had a steely pragmatism, if that's not a contradiction in terms, and an ability to charm people into doing things that they hadn't previously thought were within their moral compass or their scope of responsibility.

I want to make four points today: I will talk about definitions, evidence, process and outcomes.

So far as definitions are concerned, Martin has made some of the early running, but I want to emphasise that I see fair access, widening participation and growing participation as separate (albeit overlapping) entities. By growing participation we mean moving towards a higher level of participation by the population of the UK in higher education. I don't confine that simply to school leavers. Higher education is a function of life, not a function of the three years of privilege between the ages of 18 and 21. So growing participation is an overall ambition of the Government and, I think, shared widely by those in this room. Widening participation is a sub-set of that overall ambition, focusing upon lower socio-economic group participation in higher education, particularly those families where there has not previously been participation in higher education. We know that this is a remarkable route towards a more fulfilling life than forms of employment which have not involved higher education. Fair access is a smaller sub-set again of the other two - trying to ensure that the universities with high measures of selectivity pay proper regard to the merits of students whose conventional achievements may not otherwise identify them as clear candidates for admission.

I'll try to keep that framework in mind in the comments that follow, but it leads me to a conclusion not dissimilar to that which we heard from Martin. The problem lies not at the hallowed entry gate to the university, but at a far earlier stage in the personal development of those whom we would seek to admit to universities. The biggest issue regarding widening participation, to my mind, is the failure by 360,000 16 year olds every year to attain five good GCSEs - five GCSEs between grades A* and C including Maths and English. Only 42% of our 16 year olds currently attain that level and there is a difference between the socio-economic groups. Nearly 60% of children from higher socio-economic groups reach that level, but only 31% from lower socio-economic groups and just 16% of those eligible for free school meals.

Let me now turn to definitions and evidence, because it's perfectly clear that those figures that I've just outlined suggest a far deeper problem of social division in British society that precedes access to university. A study by Feinstein in 1999 demonstrates how early it is in a child's life that socio-economic difference impacts upon cognitive performance. The evidence from his studies is that the link between socio-economic background and educational attainment starts to show as early as 22 months of age, and by the age of 6, middle class students who had low scores in cognitive tests at 22 months have completely overtaken the few poorer children who did well in those tests. That's just the start. As the child progresses through life, a poor child who manages to stay in the top attainment bracket at 7 is more than 40% likely to drop from it by age 11 than their advantaged peers. By GCSE stage, the gap becomes a gulf, as I have already illustrated. Compared to the rest of the OECD, socio-economic background of students in the UK has a higher than average impact upon attainment. Attainment of five good GCSEs varies over 40 percentage points between the top and the bottom social class - 77% compared to 31% in 2002 - making a pupil twice as likely to receive good GCSEs if he or she is from a higher socio-economic background, as compared to the lowest.

We then get into the great British divide between models of secondary education, independent, selective and state. Independent and grammar school students are far more likely to take traditional subjects: three sciences, maths and modern languages. Pupils at independent schools are roughly three times more likely to be doing Further Maths at A level, and 2½ times more likely to be doing a language, than those at comprehensive schools. By the time we reach university entry, the socio-economic gap is an enormous chasm in this country. At some of our universities, students from independent schools are three times more likely to apply than those from maintained schools, and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are almost six times more likely to apply than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. If there's a fundamental rule for university admissions tutors it is that they cannot make offers to students who do not apply, so we can identify where the starting issue is - to raise attainment, raise aspiration and improve the quality of advice and assistance to prospective students. We are not alone in this, by the way. The US has a similar model and the socio-economic entry levels to the leading Ivy League universities are greatly differentiated, much more so in fact than in the leading UK universities.

Let me then turn to item 3, which is the admissions process. How can the selective universities attempt to compensate for those inadequacies? They cannot possibly compensate for the shortfalls of socio-economic difference in cognitive development and in secondary education. How do they then attempt to organise their affairs? I find this one of the most difficult messages to get across, because every university is different and safeguards the autonomy of its admissions process jealously. Not only that, there are great differences *within* every university - not just the differences between Oxbridge college admissions processes, but even in the non-collegiate institutions. The criteria for admission to one discipline may be quite different from the criteria for admission to another discipline. Some disciplines require higher levels of prior attainment. For example, Mathematics or Physics or Chemistry single honours programmes would be ill-advised to admit candidates who lacked the basic levels of attainment which would allow them to flourish within that discipline. Other disciplines require very little by way of prior attainment or knowledge base or conceptual development within the discipline. Philosophy, for example, may be more readily capable of taking students who fail to demonstrate the higher levels of prior attainment, provided that they demonstrate high levels of potential. Almost all universities who are selective do not rely entirely upon A level performance because to do so for the reasons that I've outlined would be to give a false impression of the potential of the student. Nonetheless, we are all aware that there is a widespread apprehension, particularly if there's anyone here who reads the Daily Mail, that university entry should be on the basis solely of A level performance and that it is a disgrace and a scandal (as was once said by a Chancellor of the Exchequer in relation to a highly selective university in the West Midlands), should a student with 4 As at A level not obtain admission to university. However, we cannot and we will not assess students for admission to selective universities simply by A level score. That is a mechanical measure. What we are after is merit and potential and ability to thrive in a highly competitive intellectual environment. That means that it's necessary for us to delve far more deeply into the background of each candidate, to explore the personal statement, what the school says about the candidate, their GCSEs - to get a broader range of contextual information. There is great variation within Russell Group universities as to whether interviews are used. I have to emphasise that selective universities are not uniform in their positioning in the preference order for potential

students. If you are towards the top of that pecking order then it makes a lot of sense to be highly meticulous and to use extensive interviewing and other techniques in order to attract the best students. If you are lower down in the pecking order with a reasonably high chance that the very finest students will go elsewhere, then it makes little sense to invest heavily in high measures of selectivity and much more sense to ensure that the students are assessed on the paperwork that's available to the admissions tutor. But I would emphasise the importance of entrusting admissions to well-qualified, well-trained and well-experienced admissions tutors in order to try to ensure that there is no barrier to entry, certainly no financial barrier as Martin Harris has said, and no barrier in terms of potential to perform well within the institution.

But that is an argument not about broadening participation, not about widening participation, but about fair access. I echo something that Martin said - is it necessary that all our most able students should be shoe-horned into the top echelon of British universities? So far as we can be assured that we are fair in our approach, it must surely be right that students end up in institutions where they're challenged but they're comfortable. I don't mean socially comfortable; I mean within an atmosphere, a culture and an environment in which they will thrive. Let's not make the students the victim of a middle class obsession with Oxbridge. There are other actually quite good universities flourishing at the highest levels in this country, and indeed the responsibility for widening participation is one shared right across the sector.

Let me next turn to what I would call reinforcing measures. It's not enough, I believe, for universities to sit back and say this is a problem in secondary education, and for Vice Chancellors to complain about the shortfalls of the state system of secondary education. We know that we need to go further and I also believe that universities are unique repositories of the talent and skills that can enhance the quality of secondary education in this country. We can do that through a number of mechanisms, all of which are now being deployed by our universities by offering opportunities, for example, for special access to programmes. The Kings College London programme for medical students from lower socio-economic groups is a stunning example. There are access programmes at Leeds giving alternative entry schemes with special consideration for students from educationally, financially and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Many other universities are offering FE to HE programmes allowing students to transfer from an FE course on a 1+3 or 2+2 basis into the university. Others are running foundation years. We at UCL have a foundation year in engineering, for example, to try to ensure that we bring students in who haven't necessarily studied suitable subjects prior to entry, but do have the required academic ability. A product of the last two years is the growing range of universities partnering with schools, either a number of schools across their patch or specifically with one or two. Several universities are now engaged in the sponsorship of academies in an attempt to try and inject into state education some of the qualities of focus in science, mathematics and modern languages that are so prevalent in the independent sector of secondary education, but often so lacking in the state sector. Universities do have this responsibility and it's one which I believe requires to be taken seriously.

Let me sum up by saying the following. The argument about fair access has been one which has too frequently distorted and disfigured much more sensible arguments about widening participation. Too frequently the concepts have become combined, too frequently they have led to a re-opening of a class warfare around the role of

higher education in the UK. I know everybody in this room shares my conviction that higher education is a remarkable good that continues to be provided in part by the state and in part by private contribution. Access to it must be offered on a basis that is transparent and fair. This is without doubt a task that is only part done. We are still, as a nation, abandoning 360,000 children at the age of 16 who fail to attain certain levels in their GCSEs. We're still facing a depth of disparity between socio-economic groups throughout their lives. That's the task to be met. We can do our bit with the tools that we have available at universities, and we will do our bit. But we can't solve those basic problems.

Professor Michael Driscoll:
Bahram at least won't be surprised if I take a less focused and narrow definition of the meaning of 'Fair Access'. On the broader view which I hope will become evident as I address you, it seems to me that the issue of fair access to higher education is now more important than ever, not only because of the equal opportunity issue, but also because of the needs of the economy and society, the successful development of which will depend on realising the full potential of all people regardless of background. Of course, the general public could be forgiven for thinking that fair access is all about the backgrounds of students who get admitted to Oxbridge. After all, this is what's most likely to be covered by the media. This issue led to the creation of OFFA, the attention of bodies like the Sutton Trust, and rearguard complaints about social engineering from independent schools, many of whom have a USP centred on getting places at Oxbridge. Yes, 200 schools out of over 3,500 supply 50% of the undergraduate entrants to Oxbridge, and 100 of those supply a third of the places. Yes, there is a massively disproportionate level of applications and admissions from independent schools. But so what? Is it really a big problem? The total annual intake of young persons to Oxbridge is 6,000, but that figure is only 2% of the total intake of 320,000 young persons going into higher education. How important is it in the scheme of things to get a few hundred more state school entrants from poor backgrounds going to Oxbridge and what would it achieve?

The position taken by the Sutton Trust is that it is a waste of talent for well qualified young people from poor backgrounds not to apply to and not to be admitted to Oxbridge. This is both patronising to young people and insulting to the rest of the university sector. There are many reasons why young people choose not to apply to particular universities, including subject availability, location and image. There's a wide range of degree courses not available at Oxbridge. Closeness to home is important for some students and Oxbridge may have an image problem amongst some groups alongside the positive image it enjoys in other quarters. The idea that other universities are less able and less successful at nurturing talent has no evidence base. If anything, there is evidence that many universities further down the wealth and prestige pecking order are very committed and very successful in nurturing talent as judged by the high value they add to the predicted outcomes of many students. I say committed, because HEPI have produced evidence to show that the amount of teaching time available to students in such universities is often significantly higher than in the wealthier and more prestigious universities, where teaching can often take very much a second place behind research.

We also need to recognise that prestige associated with historic reputation, opulent surroundings, high levels of recreational facility, powerful networks of alumni and

privileged access to some careers is not evidence of better teaching or higher standards. Wealthy universities do not provide their students with better course content, better knowledge and access to better information sources and better textbooks than those available to students at, say, the Open University or indeed at any university in the United Kingdom. The internet and online information has become a great leveller. Information learning technologies like those developed by Blackboard are democratising the quality of learning for all students. Also, there's no evidence that standards are higher in wealthier universities, so government ministers, politicians, education journalists and those who advise on choice of university should make clear that the hundreds of thousands that choose to apply to other universities and the thousands who are rejected by Oxbridge and go to other universities will have their educational needs met just as well. There can be no doubt that fair access to Oxbridge is a big problem, but not for the reasons given by the Government or the Sutton Trust. Rather it's because of the damaging and distorting effects of the reactions forced on universities, the policy actions of government and the culture of elitism promoted by the likes of the Sutton Trust, all of which focus on the symptoms of the problem rather than the underlying causes.

It's not surprising that the middle classes clamour to get their children into Oxbridge - two of the wealthiest and most prestigious universities in the world and, underpinned by wealth and exclusivity of membership, the leading brands by a big, big margin in the UK sector. They are the symbols of excellence that define British higher education, the brand under which the rest of the sector trades internationally. The output of Oxbridge still has a stranglehold on entry into many professions and the most prestigious firms in those professions, as well as appointments to senior roles within the Civil Service and the main political parties. So it's not surprising that families that can afford to are willing to pay tens of thousands educating their children in independent schools, schools that promote themselves on offering a high chance of gaining a place at Oxbridge. The steps taken by government to increase the proportion of Oxbridge entrants from state schools and poor backgrounds have achieved little and have created or worsened other more important fair access problems. Alongside the introduction of deferred tuition fees, the government did much to improve student financial support and thereby reduce financial barriers to access. Under OFFA access agreements the level of bursaries for the poorest students were set independently by each university, as Martin has set out, subject to a mandatory minimum of £300, the government having rejected a national scheme for all universities. The outcome is that the level of financial support varies substantially across the sector, from just over £3,000 bursaries at Cambridge to an average of just over £1,700 for Russell Group universities and an average of just over £700 for post-92 universities who are members of Million Plus. The reasons bursary levels are relatively low in post-92 universities is that they generally have a much higher proportion of students from poor backgrounds and are not as well resourced overall as Oxbridge and the rest of the Russell Group. The size of the bursary pot that can be afforded by post-92 universities is inevitably smaller and has to be spread across more students. This means that students in less well-resourced universities with large cohorts of poorer students do not get fair access to student support and are more likely therefore to have to work part-time and to put the completion of their studies and the level of achievement at greater risk. This is a serious fair access issue which needs to be addressed urgently and I'm glad to see that HEPI have come down emphatically in favour of scrapping the current bursary scheme in favour of a more equitable national

scheme. Martin, I thought it would be rude if I said that OFFA was a waste of public money, but given that you said it yourself, I needn't dwell on that.

The growing inequality in income and wealth across the UK university sector is the main underlying cause of fair access issues. The extent of this inequality is stark. Cambridge University has an income from all sources of just under £1 billion and an endowment, not counting the colleges, of a similar amount. It has just 17,000 students. Manchester Metropolitan University has an income of £240 million and an endowment of £300,000 and a student population of 30,000 FTE. In relation to the size of their student body, Oxbridge benefits massively and disproportionately from the taxpayer, including taxpayers who went to less well-funded universities, taxpayers whose children go to less well-funded universities and potentially from future taxpayers currently at less well-funded universities but paying the same fees and receiving less financial support, fewer teaching staff and less well-staffed resources for student services. While receiving teaching income on the same basis as all other universities, Oxbridge secures the lion's share of research funding from the tax payer and the lion's share of Gift Aid which ultimately has to be covered by the general tax payer. Wealth and income inequality results in inequality in indicators of reputation and prestige, what Sir David Watson has called the reputational range. Most of the KPIs in unofficial newspaper league tables are input measures directly or indirectly linked to wealth or income, so all they really reveal is a ranking of funding. Compilers of league tables place no value on value added in student achievement, or on research and knowledge transfer productivity, or on social inclusion. On those KPIs the rankings of institutions would be reversed. This has resulted in the excessive focus on fair access to Oxbridge. It has resulted in an iniquitous student support scheme, it has provided a platform for organisations like the Sutton Trust to preach its elitist culture and to make baseless assertions about the differences between universities, and it has prevented tax income from being allocated where it is most needed and where the evidence shows it will offer the highest returns. But perhaps, most importantly, it has diverted attention away from more important fair access issues.

Here are some examples. The iniquitous and unfair treatment of part-time students who, unlike full-time students, are not able to defer fees and do not have access to the same levels of financial support. Access to university can be a postcode lottery for many people, and this Government is to be commended for its encouragement to towns which do not have universities of their own to establish such provision. Much less commendable, of course, is the decision to reduce growth in student numbers next year by 5,000 places and to offer no guidance about future growth. The planning and success and sustainability of measures to improve geographical spread of access to university will depend critically on growth in student numbers. The Government is to be commended for encouraging closer engagement between universities and business and the development of co-funded, work-based courses. This will encourage fairer access to higher education for people in work. The Government has not, however, addressed the issue of SMEs that may not be able to afford co-funding. Unless this is addressed appropriately, work-based access to HE could become an employer lottery. The recession is likely to exacerbate fair access issues. When more are applying to university, the failure to meet this growth with additional student numbers will deny thousands of the opportunity to access university education and training. History shows that the biggest strides in widening participation and fair

access happen when places are expanding and the recent removal of funding for ELQs will present a large obstacle to many who wish to re-train during the recession ahead of the next recovery. If fair access means anything, it means the right of all students to go to a university that they can be proud of and to graduate with qualifications that they are proud of earning and that their employers value. If, as it has been reported in the Sunday Times, the Secretary of State has his way and that new universities are confined to an imagined former stereotype role of vocational training which never existed, and if research funding is permanently concentrated in a small, wealthy Ivy League, this will damage fair access and will only encourage more setting of hierarchies based on difference. And what about the fair access issue of the 80,000 students who apply to university every year, get the qualifications necessary for entry, but don't get into any university? We need, I think, to resist being distracted by the narrowest and least important of fair access issues and concentrate instead on the scandalous and shameful difference in participation between neighbourhoods in this country. In the constituency of Kensington and Chelsea, 70% of young people go to university. In Sheffield Brightside or Nottingham North it's less than 10%. Now that is a real equal opportunity issue.

So if we want to be serious about fair access, we have to get away from the tired, sterile, low material arguments about Oxbridge admission places and the distorting effects that these have on education policy and, instead, address the substantive and important fair access issues and widening participation issues which affect equality of opportunity for hundreds of thousands of young and mature people from all backgrounds to access any form of higher education in any university.