

Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)

House of Commons Seminar: 2nd March 2011

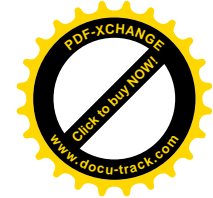
Widening Participation and Fair Access

Sir Martin Harris:

I want to focus on some general issues about widening participation and fair access, although I don't doubt that some immediate issues will come up in due course. Let's just remind ourselves, because we're in danger of forgetting it, that widening participation in its broader sense has been one of the great success stories of English universities in the last seven or eight years – really a triumphant expansion of opportunities for young people from families and from schools where university education had seemed to be unattainable and, whatever happens over the next few years, that success story should not be forgotten. However, inside that issue, inside that success, there is the recalcitrant problem which the Sutton Trust have kept our attention focused on: there are a relatively small, but not trivial, number of young people who have the qualifications, or could easily have the qualifications, to go into a highly selective university and choose not to, or don't, for whatever reason.

Interestingly, just a little tiny bit of history, when the Office For Fair Access was set up – it just shows how semantic change takes place – fair access meant widening participation and, just in the five years or so that we've been operating, fair access has stopped meaning widening participation. You remember that fees were going to deter poor people from going to university and that had to be addressed, and it has been addressed very successfully and, as a result, we have turned our attention to what we now call fair access – the more focused question of whether people always get into the universities that will stretch them to their limits and increase their chances of upward mobility. We don't know whether the higher fees will change behaviour. What we know is that there will be regime of bursaries, coupled with fee waivers; what we don't know is whether they will change behaviour any more than the previous bursary regime changed behaviour, and let's just remind ourselves that what we do know, pretty much beyond dispute, is that, under the £3,000 fee regime, bursaries appear to have had no effect whatever on whether young people go to university and, if so, whether they choose one university rather than another to seek admission to. I don't know whether that will change with the much higher fee regime, but it is something that is one of the many uncertainties that face us and the sector over the coming years.

Just one word about bursaries versus fee waivers. Here, thinking is evolving very quickly all the time at the moment. Until now, I was of the view that, in terms of student support, £1,000 in terms of bursary and £1,000 in terms of fee waiver is the same from the point of view of the student, as far as the long term net cost of going to university is concerned. Of course, it isn't the same in terms of the cost to the Treasury, especially in the short run, and I do think that all of us need to think about the question as to how bursaries for students, cash in hand now while you are a student, is weighed up in terms of the strategy of your university, versus fee waivers where there is a student debt reduction in the longer term. Why would a university go for that rather than for bursaries, when students surely will be pressing for bursaries



rather than fee waivers in general? I think we'd take that as given. Well, of course, the answer is that fee waivers reduce the immediate cost to the Treasury. Why might a university want to take that into account? It might want to take it into account because, if the sector as a whole overspends substantially in terms of what the Treasury has said, then things will happen. So I'll just leave that lying on the table. You understand that that is not an OFFA issue. As far as OFFA is concerned, OFFA is there to see that students are not deterred from university on financial grounds. But, looked at from the point of view of the sector, it may turn out that bursaries and fee waivers are not neutral in terms of what happens to the sector.

I want to talk a little bit about fair access, as I've been invited to do - fair access, in this narrower sense of whether young people with the relevant qualifications should be further assisted to go to certain universities because that is shown to increase upward social mobility. I'm going to leave aside entirely the question of whether it is a good or a bad thing that we should be encouraging students to do that. The fact is that it is a tri-partisan policy, that is if all three Ministers and Shadow Ministers were here in the room they would all say it is self-evident that young people with ability who could take advantage of more selective universities and could gain upward social mobility by that, should be encouraged to do so or, at the very least, they shouldn't be deterred from doing so by things that have happened earlier in their lives or their school careers. So I'm going to just take that as a given, although not all of you in the room will, and ask how to address it.

The answer in the 2004 legislation was that financial support at 18 was going to be the way to change people's behaviour. That is to say that universities that were most selective would give higher bursaries and that that would encourage students of the requisite ability to apply to those universities in greater numbers than they currently do. Remember there is flat-lining here. We've got no increase, no decrease, just a flat-lining proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups going to the more selective universities. I think what we now know is that if we are serious about this - and I think this is probably the most important thing I want to say this morning - then we have to address our efforts at very much earlier ages than 18. That is to say, I'm not sitting here this morning saying student support at 18 will not be part of the package that all universities offer, whether bursaries or fee waivers; what I am saying is that if we seriously want to address this narrow fair access agenda, then we have to do things that are really quite different. That is to say we have to work with schools much more closely than we do at the moment and we have to address student choices at 14 and at the transition point at 16. Remember, most of the young people we're talking about, who have the ability but don't go to selective universities, are not people who sail through 11-18 schools, they are all young people who change institution at 16, so you have the question of what advice do they get at 14 and what choices do they make? What advice and guidance do they have over that critical change of institution when they leave an 11-16 school and go to an FE college? What continuity is there, and what advice and guidance and constant support are universities or groups of universities giving them throughout that process? I am not saying it can be the sole or even the primary responsibility of universities to deal with young people when they are 14 and 16, but I do think the universities have a role and that, in terms of the money they are focusing on widening participation and, above all, on fair access in this narrow sense that I am using it, then it's clear that early intervention is absolutely critical.

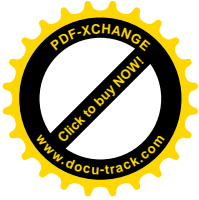
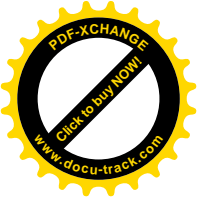


If you believe there is a group of people – Peter Lampl says 3,000, some say 5,000 - who could be aiming at selective universities but aren't, then there are some who there who we might want to assist, leaving aside the fact that many of them don't want to, or that for many of them it wouldn't be ideal for them anyway. They are hugely dispersed, and the difficulty is in finding them when they are 14. If you talk to Headteachers of 11-16 schools, they will often tell you that there might be one or two students a year in their school for whom three separate sciences is appropriate – if they are to get into the pool at 16 where they can do the right A Levels, where they can get into the pool at 18 and where they could enter Medical School. Those of you who have any connection with any kind of school will know that, to run a curriculum that caters for one or two or three young people is extraordinarily difficult. But that's where these 3,000 are. They are in ones and twos and threes, they are not in twenties and thirties and forties and fifties where you can devise a curriculum accordingly.

In my view, there is a danger of that agenda becoming too central to the political discourse. It's an agenda I support and I've always worked towards, but I do think we have to be very careful that we don't allow that to divert attention from the much broader agenda that I started with, that is widening participation, because it seems to me that the evidence is clear that widening participation in the old, all-embracing sense – opportunities for young people from families with no HE experience and from schools with little HE contact – thrives when there are places available in institutions for those young people to take up and where the graduate contribution, the fees regime and/or the student support regime are seen as adequate for young people to make those decisions of choice. In the broader widening participation agenda my anxiety is really that places in the future may not be as available as they have been and that the students who then don't gain places may be disproportionately of those from families with no HE experience, with least pressure from school or family to seek to enter Higher Education. Just looking at the note on today's paper, I don't see that as being in any way juxtaposed to the further development of high quality vocational training and so on. The critical thing is to find ways of giving students the right advice at 14 about the career pattern and the choices that are open to them.

And why do I keep coming back to 14? I think, very interestingly, the group of people concerned with careers advice have shown, to my satisfaction completely in the last couple of years, that almost any choice that is presented to a 14 year old that is genuinely presented as academic by teachers of those young people, is actually likely to be career guidance by another name, that is to say the choices you make at 14, which may suit the timetable of the school, which may suit the fact that some teachers are more gifted than others and so on, all of those are factors that influence a 14 year old and all the advice may be given by teachers in the best of good faith, but they are tantamount to giving career advice and all the evidence is that, at 14, those young people and their parents need at least an element of independent advice and guidance on what they choose and they need help to get the curriculum if the school they are currently in is not able to provide it, i.e. twilight teaching or Saturday teaching. All of those are ways that we need to address if we are serious about finding the young people that we're talking about. Others will go down the vocational route at that point and it seems to me that that is entirely reasonable.

To sum up, I think that the narrow fair access agenda is very much centre stage politically and I'm quite clear, as I've said, how we might address that. I think the broader widening participation agenda depends on availability of places and adequate



support for institutions and for individuals. We must be careful that we do not allow the perceived cost to become a huge deterrent to students. You remember when fees were first introduced, for example, there was an up-front fee of £3,000 and this did deter a lot of people. In the end, reality resumed and people came to understand. I hope we can avoid the worst of the misinformation this time. There's enough of a change anyway without having misinformation added.

And, finally, I would just add one anxiety of my own, that there are two kinds of institution to which we'll need to give particular attention over the next period. One is the very specialist institutions and I'll leave them on one side because they are not primarily about widening participation and fair access, but it seems to me that the worst thing of all that could happen to widening participation and fair access would be if any institutions, particularly in a town or city where they were the only HE provider, got into such financial difficulty that their future was threatened. I really do think that the biggest possible threat to widening participation and fair access would be that situation. When you talk to people about the possibility of institutions closing, they always say, "Would it matter if there was one less in London?" to which I say, "That's the wrong question." You can answer that how you want. What I do say is that, if there is a town 'X' in which there is only one HE provider of substance and that that were to cease to be viable, that is a very serious threat, not just to fair access, but to widening participation in the broadest sense, and I think that nobody has yet addressed what might happen under certain circumstances.

Professor Susan Price:

Bahram invited me to speak last August, at which point March seemed a long time off. However it has turned out to be longer in many senses than I could have anticipated, given the extent of change – seismic change – in the intervening period.

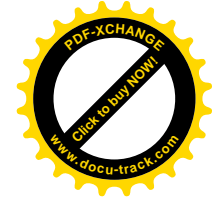
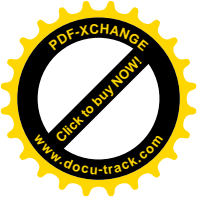
I'm not an academic expert on this topic as I'm sure many of you are, but I do care passionately (a word sometimes over-used) about WP in my institution, as do my colleagues.

WP has now been replaced in official discourse by 'social mobility' (to the chagrin of sociologists who recognise this as a much more subtle concept). Social mobility refers to the degree to which an individual or group's status is able to change in terms of position throughout their lifetime through a system of social hierarchy or stratification. 'Fair access' is very different, limited in scope and ambition, yet possibly of most interest to government, certainly in terms of public pronouncements and policy drivers.

'Fair access' is about getting 'the best and the brightest' of our disadvantaged young people into the most selective institutions.

Well. It is at the very least arguable that a few hundred more of these disadvantaged young people entering one part of the sector will do little to promote social mobility within society as a whole.

I would not however wish to argue against this aim. Of course all able students should have an equal chance of entering specific universities. But I would question



the extent of its contribution to a fairer, more cohesive society and meeting the need for an economy based on extensive high level skills.

It could I think be argued that universities with least experience of supporting, through to success, students who may have experienced high levels of deprivation - or just a poor secondary education – may find that they lack the experience and skills (and possibly in some cases the will) to retain such students. I hope that does not prove to be the case.

But there is an implicit assumption in this thinking that students who choose to attend a university with a long and successful track record of widening participation – which may well be their local university – are somehow making a second-best choice. At times this is indeed quite explicit. This seriously undervalues the work that lies behind the statistics that as a sector we are so proud of. And seriously undervalues the work of institutions focussed on WP: which is not just about 18 year olds entering university, but also about lifelong and second chance learning for mature students, taking into account a whole range of prior qualifications – not just A Levels – and prior experiences.

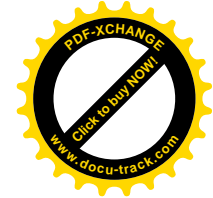
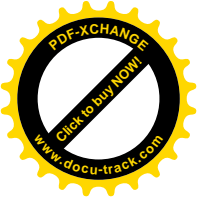
The proportion of young people recruited from the most disadvantaged parts of the country has increased by about 30% in the past 5 years. Still, the full-time young participation rate for lower socio-economic groups remains approximately half that of higher socio-economic groups. And 60% of children from higher socio-economic groups achieve 5 good GCSEs compared to 31% from lower socio-economic groups. If these trends reverse in the new regime, we may well be seen as a sector as hindering, not promoting, social mobility.

Modern, newer, universities are as we know the very universities whose funding will most likely reduce quite significantly relative to those with a much weaker track record in WP and are the very universities being pressured to set their fees at a lower rate, risking their sustainability and certainly risking a reduction in support for students who need it most.

It is a typically English mindset, it seems to me, to wish to create a hierarchy where others would see a spectrum, a desirable diversity of mission and purpose. We find it reassuring to know who we can look down on. But embedding funding (and educational) inequalities still further, as we now seem set to do, is deeply regrettable and could prove very divisive for an increasingly divided sector. It is very positive that WP funding has thus far been protected by HEFCE, but this is against the end of Aim Higher, cuts in funding for lifelong learning and an uncertain future for Action on Access.

Does WP or social mobility matter? Yes, if we want an inclusive, cohesive society and yes if we want highly skilled individuals, of all backgrounds, driving our economy forward. I don't actually think that argument needs to be made any more, which is progress.

But will the new funding arrangements for HE continue to promote the progress we have seen – we have driven – over recent years? It is clear that the government, certainly publicly, remains committed to social mobility; David Willetts claimed less than 2 weeks ago that it is “at the heart of the Government’s agenda”.



What, however, will be the impact of a significant debt burden on participation by groups traditionally more debt-averse? On mature, second chance, students? On Muslim students? On any student who cannot rely on the bank of Mum and Dad?

We don't know. And so we are heading for several years of uncertainty and a high risk of rolling back all that has been achieved

What about me? I was the first person in my family to go to university. There was not WP in the '70's. I passed my 11 plus, went to a grammar school, and on – pretty automatically – to university. My older brother was the second person. He trained as a teacher at Sunderland University in his late 30s after leaving school at 16 and a series of different jobs. That was WP and it transformed his life. What's more, he is an excellent teacher, stretching the ambition of his own pupils.

What about my university: Leeds Metropolitan. Do we practice what we preach? Well, we try and we try hard. We align with or exceed most of our benchmarks, with the exception of disabled student allowance recipients and we are working on that. We excel in widening participation for mature students.

Our outreach work focuses on primary Summer Schools, young African and Afro-Caribbean men, young Asian women, Looked After Children and local white working class boys. We have ample evidence that these interactions make a real difference to aspirations and life outcomes.

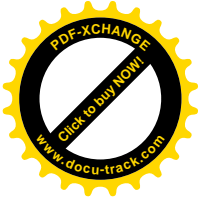
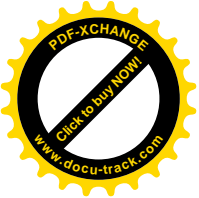
Let me share with you some statistics for last year from AimHigher in Yorkshire :

74% of AimHigher leavers achieved 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and Maths (twice as many as the proportion of leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds at 39%); AimHigher leavers achieved GCSE points scores of 357 (the average for all leavers was 300)

We work as part of HEAR WY (Higher Education Aspiration Raising West Yorkshire) with the universities of Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield, Leeds Trinity University College, Leeds College of Music and the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. This collaborative working means we share best practice, do not duplicate effort (a real risk when AimHigher disappears) and develop joint projects which we know work. It is unclear what the future will be for this collaborative endeavour.

Let me share an anecdote with you. Last year, I received an email from a parent of a boy – year 10 – who had attended one of our Summer Schools. His mother wrote: “We had to literally force John (not his real name) to come to your campus. But now he is back home and what a transformation! Instead of the surly layabout who left us last week we have a thoughtful, polite son who is thinking about his future. Thank you so much!” That made me smile! Of course, we have many deeply moving stories of students with few opportunities in life who have grasped the opportunity to study with us with both hands and achieved at a very high level. More often than not, they go into careers dedicated to public service; less often into investment banking.

WP is about opportunity and transformation, for its direct beneficiaries and rippling out to their families and communities.



Fair Access is a bit like the Yellow Box at a road junction. If you're old enough, you'll perhaps recall an ad introducing the then new Yellow Boxes, over which an announcer intoned: "The Yellow Box makes all drivers do what the good drivers have been doing for years".

Will Fair Access make all universities do what the good, in this context the WP, universities have been doing for years? Of course not. That is not the intention and it will not be the result.

If Oxbridge, the Russell Group, our "glittering universities" as I have heard Lord Browne call them, genuinely do expand access to their institutions on the basis of potential and ability – not just prior qualifications – then I will applaud alongside others. But this is not WP; it is not social mobility; and it is not enough. I look forward to seeing Nick Clegg's cross-government social mobility strategy and how he intends to address these inconsistencies between avowed Government purpose and imminent funding methodology.