Higher Education Policy Institute

The Robbins Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today

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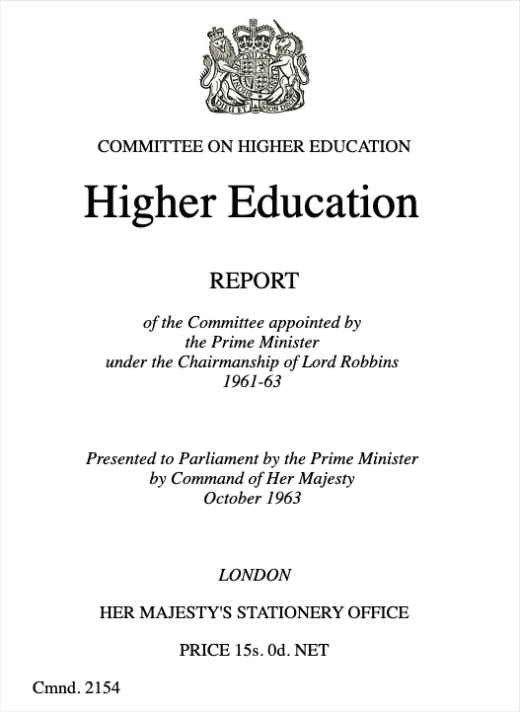
The 1963 Robbins Report was undoubtedly one of the most important official social policy documents of the post-war era. It has been regularly compared to the Poor Law Report (1909) and the Beveridge Report (1942).[1] Sixty years on, we are still talking about it.

The Report was an expansionist document that foresaw a much larger higher education sector in Great Britain. Both the Conservative Government under the new Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home and the Labour Opposition under Harold Wilson, which entered office in 1964, quickly accepted it.

As the huge expansion of higher education outlined in the Report largely occurred, it is tempting to assume higher education policy in subsequent decades must have followed the Robbins blueprint. But that would be wrong. In all sorts of important areas, policymakers veered off in a different direction.



COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education

REPORT

of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63

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The Robbins Report, October 1963

1. The Robbins principle was accepted but under regular threat

The Robbins Report is perhaps most famous for 'the Robbins principle' which underscored all its recommendations. This states: 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.' (Paragraph 31)

For some of the post-war period, the Robbins principle was followed – more or less. But it was often under threat. In 1985, for example, Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, told the House of Commons:

> *Since 1963, successive Governments have endorsed the so-called 'Robbins principle' that, 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.'*
>
> *The UGC [the University Grants Committee] and the NAB [the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education in England] have advised that qualification for higher education should be interpreted broadly and that the test should not be paper qualifications but 'ability to benefit'. So long as the taxpayer continues to bear most of the cost of higher education, however,* ***the benefit must be sufficient to justify the cost****. Subject to that, the Government accept that the criteria for entry to higher education – which will, as at present, remain under the control of institutions themselves – should place more emphasis on intellectual competence, motivation and maturity, and less on formal qualifications.*[2]

One apparent paradox is that while Keith Joseph was redefining the Robbins principle, he was also, via his policy of introducing GCSEs, ensuring that far more people would come to be sufficiently well qualified to enter higher education than in the past. This helped to produce surging demand.[3]

As a result of concerns about cost and increases in the proportion of young people qualified to attend higher education, in time the Robbins principle came to seem like ancient history. In 2010, it was suggested hundreds of thousands of people were applying to higher education and not finding a place.[4]

Yet the Robbins principle still echoed in the corridors of Whitehall. It was one lever used to persuade the Treasury to remove student number caps in England from the mid-2010s, producing what has been described by one vice-chancellor as a new 'golden age'.[5]

The removal of student number controls also served to reinvigorate concerns about over-expansion. For example, the Augar report of 2019 floated 'Targeted number caps on courses offering poor value for money'[6] and there have been regular ministerial threats to end subsidies for 'low-value' courses.

2. The Robbins Report followed, not led, on future student numbers

The Robbins Report is also particularly known for its projections of future student numbers. The Committee looked at likely demand from qualified young people but generally rejected manpower planning:

> *while it is possible, for a number of professions and over a short term, to calculate with a fair degree of precision what the national need for recruits will be, we have found no reliable basis for reckoning the totality of such needs over a long term.* (Paragraph 134)

The expansion that was foreseen in the Robbins Report was therefore based on two variables.

i. **The number of young people:** The Robbins Committee considered the total number of young people in future years. Their 'recommendations' on future full-time student numbers ended in 1980/81 because the Committee knew in 1963 roughly how many 18-year olds there would be in 1980/81 as these people had just been born. (Table 30)

ii. **The number of people qualified for higher education:** The Committee estimated how many young people were likely to be qualified to attend higher education, using the past as a guide and assuming the percentage of the age group with the necessary qualifications 'will continue to grow up to 1980 by annual increments nearly as large as the average since 1954.' (Paragraph 154)

This methodology suggested the need for an increase from 238,000 full-time students in 1963/64 to 558,000 in 1980/81. As the Labour peer Lord Taylor put it at the time, 'The Robbins Report has been claimed as a victory for the expansionists. It is not: it is a victory for sober statistical science over emotionally motivated prejudice.'[7]

The overarching Robbins methodology for student places has been regularly used in the years since the Report appeared and it underscores, for example, all HEPI's work on future demand for higher education.[8]

At the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the Robbins Report in 2013, David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, noted:

> *This student demand model meant they had to assess two crucial factors – demographic trends and educational trends. The demographic trend was clear. The tidal wave from the post-war baby boom was about to surge through higher education. A million babies had been born in 1947, compared with an inter-war low of around 600,000. The challenge of educating these surging numbers was a hot political topic. Expansion of higher education was as urgent and imperative as the need to build houses and schools in the 1950s. But superimposed on this was a second educational trend. Robbins saw himself as in many ways the true successor to Butler's school reforms embodied in the 1944 Education Act. More young people were staying on at school to age 15, 16 and beyond. More were getting the qualifications which would give them a claim to a place at university.*[9]

One important exception to the regular work of the Robbins Committee on future student numbers, however, was medical education. They followed the University Grants Committee in assuming the proportion of students taking medical courses would halve by 1980 (but that the number of students would still grow by over 25%). (Paragraph 165)

According to John Carswell, who had been a senior civil servant involved with the Robbins Report, 'If the opportunity for studying medicine had been conceded by the Report to those "qualified and willing" to undertake it in the same measure as it was in other subjects, the cost estimates would have been much higher.'[10]

Today, workforce planning for the National Health Service continues to take place separately from other higher education decisions, and demand outstrips supply by a considerable margin.

Overall, the Robbins Report's focus on the underlying demographics and the proportion of school leavers likely to have the qualifications expected for entering higher education proved a good – but not exact – guide to future trends.

In the first few years after the Robbins Report appeared, full-time enrolments surpassed the numbers in the Report but, by 1980, there were 524,000 full-time students, which was 6% shy of the Robbins recommendation for that year. However, it is important to note that Lord Robbins had been instructed to focus on full-time students and, during the same period, the number of part-time students exploded, boosted by the Open University.

Full-time student numbers

	Robbins's expectations	Actual	Difference
Science / Tech students	259,000	176,000	-83,000
Other subjects	299,000	348,000	+49,000
Male students	305,000	310,000	+5,000
Female students	253,000	214,000	-39,000
Total full-time students	558,000	524,000	-34,000

Source: John Carswell, *Government and the Universities in Britain*, 1985, p.169-172

The Robbins Committee expected growth to be disproportionately in Science and Technology disciplines. It has even been argued that 'science-oriented Cambridge' alumni were comparatively influential in the Robbins Committee, in contrast to alumni from the 'more arts-based Oxford University' in the University Grants Committee.[11]

But it is not clear how the Robbins Report's expectations on the take-up of Science and Technology could have come true without reforms to schooling aimed at increasing the supply of suitably qualified applicants. In the years after the Robbins Report appeared, there were significantly fewer Science and Technology students as well as fewer women students than had been foreseen. Looking back, Sir Claus Moser, Statistical Adviser to the Robbins Committee, later recalled, 'the children were not behaving according to our projected plans.'[12]

3. The Robbins Report did not sort out student finance

Back in the 1950s, applicants generally had to make separate applications for a university place and to their Local Education Authority for student finance (for both fees and the costs of living). The chances of getting financial support, and the value of that support, depended on where you lived.

Sometimes, successful applicants were refused support so could not enrol due to a shortage of finance. Empty places arose when an applicant could 'be refused an award so near the beginning of the academic year that the university department which he had hoped to enter cannot fill the vacancy thus created.'[13]

In other words, the system did not work well for either students or institutions.

This messy situation was resolved when the Macmillan Government (largely) accepted the recommendations of the Anderson Report of 1960. This proposed British residents on first-degree courses should be entitled to public support for living costs as well as fees if they held two A-Level passes or equivalent.[14]

Linking student finance to school leavers' qualifications, which has been floated by Ministers and others in recent years, is nothing new. Nor is the early specialisation encouraged by basing university entry on two or three A-Levels, something Rishi Sunak's proposed Advanced British Standard could possibly tackle.

While the new mandatory grants implemented from 1962 were means tested against parental income, all successful applicants received some support.[15] When the Robbins Report came out, it assumed further expansion of higher education would occur, initially at least, within this new funding model.

That is then what happened. However, while the Robbins Report opposed student loans in the short-term due to 'undesirable disincentive effects', it saw the case for future 'experiment in this direction.' (Paragraph 647) The Committee had assumed 'the climate of opinion might make such a concept acceptable in about ten years' time'.[16] Robbins himself later became an advocate for loans.

By failing to rule out the idea of loans forever, the Robbins Report was on the right side of history. But student loans did not begin for another 27 years. Instead, once the costs of the expansion heralded by the Robbins Committee started to mount up, the funding for each student fell.

Most notably, during the Conservatives' 18 years in power after 1979, the number of students doubled and the amount of public spending on each one halved.[17] In other words, there were twice as many students at no extra cost. Eventually, maintenance loans were introduced in 1990 to ease the situation.

While this helped students and relieved taxpayers, it was not enough to halt – let alone reverse – the drop in funding for each student's education. So tuition fees, and then tuition fee loans, arrived too.[18] The £3,000 fees in place from 2006, for example, meant a big increase for educating each student.[19]

Precise comparisons over lengthy time periods are impossible due to a lack of comparable data. But it is nonetheless instructive to draw a rough comparison between the cost of educating each student at the time of the Robbins Report and now.

In 1962/63, educating a student cost £528 a year on average, nine-tenths of which came from public funds.[20] This is equivalent to around £9,371 today, close to England's current £9,250 fee cap for full-time undergraduates.[21] However, a majority of the fees are now repaid through loan repayments after study.

Even after accounting for the additional payments made by the Treasury to cover areas like the costs of more expensive courses, amounting to around £1.5 billion a year, it is clear the average taxpayer contribution to each student's education has fallen considerably in real terms over time.

Students also received maintenance support from public funds worth £222 a year on average in the early 1960s, equivalent to £3,856 today. In 2022/23, the average maintenance loan paid out in England was around twice as high (£7,410),[22] but – as with fee loans – students will repay most of the costs after study.

The UK is three-and-a-half times richer than in 1963. But taxpayers are spending less on average funding each student. However, there are 10 times more full-time students than when Robbins reported.

4. The binary divide was contrary to Robbins's recommendations

One big conclusion of the Robbins Report was that there should be 'a system of higher education'. Robbins may have been an economic liberal but the Robbins Report was not averse to a bit of centralised planning (and even, in places, cast slightly jealous eyes on the Soviet Union).

The Report said:

> *There are many types of social activity where the absence of co-ordinating mechanism other than the framework of the law is not a disadvantage. The absence of a plan for everything is not necessarily an indication of chaos. But higher education is so obviously and rightly of great public concern, and so large a proportion of its finance is provided in one way or another from the public purse, that it is difficult to defend the continued absence of co-ordinating principles and of a general conception of objectives. However well the country may have been served by the largely unco-ordinated activities and initiatives of the past, we are clear that from now on these are not good enough. In what follows therefore we proceed throughout on the assumption that the needs of the present and still more of the future demand that there should be a system.* (Paragraph 19)

But instead of a single system, Harold Wilson's Government decided to operate a 'dual system' between universities and polytechnics. Anthony Crosland, as the Secretary of State for Education and Science, argued for the authorities to have a considerable level of control in his Woolwich speech of 1965:

> *a substantial part of the higher education system should be under social control, and directly responsive to social needs. It is further desirable that local government, responsible for the schools and having started and built up so many institutions of higher education, should maintain a reasonable stake in higher education.*[23]

It seems a bizarre decision for an administration that was simultaneously trying to eradicate the binary division between grammar schools and secondary moderns but it was to last for 25 years.

Lord Robbins fiercely opposed the split in a prescient speech in the House of Lords:

> *Far from seeking to minimise barriers, it [the binary system] positively creates them. We know this not only from the outright refusal to contemplate the integration of the teacher-training colleges into the universities; we know it also from the attitude currently adopted to any proposals for the incorporation in universities of any technical colleges. I must say, my Lords, that I find this attitude most disquieting. Here we have universities anxious to experiment with new syllabuses, new organisational forms. Here we have technical colleges, supported by local industry and by all accounts well suited to develop into university faculties. Splendid experiments are possible. Yet because the abracadabra of this precious binary system prohibits transfer, all suggestions for union are ruled out.*[24]

Lord Robbins went on to reject Crosland's claim that the binary system could replicate what had proved successful in other countries: 'In spite of some protests from the romantics and the traditionalists, technology has long been part of the university system here, which is not the case on the Continent'.

The subsequent successful erasure of the binary line in 1992 has now lasted longer than the dual system ever did. So in this regard, the higher education sector looks more like what Robbins hoped for than it did in the years after his Report came out. However, the Robbins Report has been criticised for ignoring:

> *The purposes of local authority institutions, their links with local (or denominational) power and affection, the need to replace their work below degree level if they vanished into the university world, [and] the fact that their staff were not paid the same as university teachers.*[25]

The Coalition Government's Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills from 2010 to 2015, Vince Cable, complained, 'Over the past half century, though, we have been more in thrall to the admirable vision of Lionel Robbins than we have to the equally pertinent vision of Tony Crosland.'[26]

This sort of critique explains why the end of the binary divide has not stopped policymakers from flirting with new types of higher education institutions that have a different status to traditional universities. For example, England is currently rolling out a network of Institutes of Technology.

5. The Robbins Report did not lead to lots of new universities

The Robbins Report recommended institutional upgrades, such as the Colleges of Advanced Technology becoming universities. This happened (in 1966), unlike the additional proposal of 'giving university status to some ten Regional Colleges, Central Institutions and Colleges of Education.' (Recommendation 91)

The Report also wanted 'the immediate foundation of six new universities, of which at least one should be in Scotland.' (Paragraph 24) Yet most of the brand new universities founded around the time of the Robbins Report and which are often associated with it were already established, or well on their way to becoming so, when the Report came out.

Sussex appeared in 1961, East Anglia and York in 1963, Lancaster and Essex in 1964, while Kent and Warwick started in 1965. All had been agreed to separately from, and earlier than, the Robbins Committee's work.

In general, the Robbins Committee had envisaged the new universities they wanted to see as being situated in rather different types of places to the 'smaller cities' and greenfield sites previously favoured by the University Grants Committee.

In other words, new institutions were not regarded as a core part of regional policy: 'Of the new universities to be founded and the existing colleges selected for the eventual granting of university status we hope that the larger number will be in great centres of population or in their vicinity.' (Paragraph 502)

However, as John Carswell later recalled: 'Only one completely new university was eventually designated. This was Stirling'.[27] This new institution was agreed by Quintin Hogg, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, in July 1964, just three months before the Conservatives lost office.[28] It opened in 1967.

The first building at Stirling University, photo by Bisse Anderson

Lord Robbins was the new University of Stirling's first Chancellor and Stirling Students' Union resides in the Robbins Building today. However, the siting of the new institution was perhaps less in tune with the Robbins Committee's recommendations than other potential Scottish sites may have been:

> *The all-important locational decision to select Stirling over other possible towns reaffirmed a traditional, Oxonian view of an appropriate setting for a university, an outcome only partially offset by the architectural choice of using modern brutalist architecture, albeit in a modest way. … The perpetuation contrasted with the idea of universities developing the natural, technical, and social sciences in larger industrial cities, a view reminiscent of the Redbrick era and epitomized by the Robbins Report.*[29]

Aside from the University of the Air (renamed the Open University), Harold Wilson's Government opposed other new foundations. In Anthony Crosland's words: 'We have decided that, with one possible exception, there should be no new universities or accessions to university status for about ten years.'[30]

There were no new UK universities of any sort during the 1970s. In the 1980s, there were just two: the private University of Buckingham, established in 1983 via a Royal Charter; and the University of Ulster, founded in 1984 through a merger of the New University of Ulster and Ulster Polytechnic.

6. Robbins's ideas on student accommodation were not followed

The Robbins Report put enormous value on students living side by side with one another. It noted only 32% of full-time university students lived in university-provided accommodation in 1961/62, with considerably more (43%) in 'lodgings' and 25% living at home (down from 42% of the total before the Second World War, though relatively static in terms of the number of students). Living at home was particularly common in Scotland. (Table 51)

Although the Report noted 'the present proportion of students living in accommodation associated with their university or college' was typically lower in other countries than in Britain, it nonetheless foresaw two-thirds of the additional students living in accommodation provided by their institution: 'If the expansion of higher education that we recommend is to be achieved, students must be found somewhere to live.' (Paragraph 595)

The Report expected a big increase – to 54% – in the proportion of full-time students in 'college, hall or hostel' by 1980/81. The Robbins Committee did not believe new rooms would all need to be in traditional catered halls of residence, however, recognising there would be demand for 'blocks of study-bedrooms or self-contained student flats'. (Paragraph 591)

Given the 'bulge' of young people at the time the Robbins Report appeared, the Committee argued the growth in student accommodation should be front loaded. However, the Labour Opposition were among those who were sceptical that such residences could be found in time for the rising number of school leavers:

> *a great many of them will have to go to their nearest university and live at home. We do not like it, but we cannot see how this problem can be otherwise dealt with in the immediate crisis period.*[31]

The Robbins Report warned the provision of a lot of new student accommodation would 'make very heavy demands on public investment resources.' Perhaps that is why, in the event, privately rented

lodgings remained common and some people pushed for more students to live at home. As the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Margaret Thatcher published a White Paper in 1972 which sought to 'encourage many more students to base themselves at home while studying.'[32]

William Whyte has shown that not much changed in terms of the proportion of students living in different sorts of accommodation after the Robbins Report appeared: by the mid-1970s, only around half of the students that Robbins had expected to be in 'halls of residence or equivalent' were actually there.[33]

Around this time, the University Grants Committee stopped providing capital grants for student accommodation. Students responded creatively: 'Somehow or other the growing student population found lodgings, bed-sits, ruined cottages, [and] "short-term" terraces scheduled for demolition in old industrial areas.'[34]

The subsequent growth in private-sector Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) from the 1990s onwards provided a way to deliver more student beds without major public investment, which may or may not have been a trend the economic liberal Lionel Robbins would have welcomed.

Yet despite the enormous growth in private-sector PBSA and despite limitations in comparing different datasets, the latest numbers suggest the overall pattern of student accommodation has still not changed as much as had been expected by the Robbins Committee.

Reliable and comparable data on students' accommodation are hard to come by, but the National Student Accommodation Survey 2023 suggests:

- 36% of students were living in Purpose-Built Student Accommodation owned either by their higher education institution or a private provider;
- 46% of students were renting from a private landlord; and
- 15% of students were living at home and a further 4% had their own property.[35]

Today, the UK has a shortage of student accommodation across much of the country. The significant capital costs of new student accommodation are difficult for universities to find given other priorities, new private-sector student accommodation has become less viable as interest rates have risen and some private landlords are being discouraged by new regulation.[36]

Combined with reductions in the real value of maintenance support, which has held down student incomes,[37] this has produced an accommodation shortage that might seem familiar in many respects to those who wrote the Robbins Report 60 years ago.

7. The Robbins proposals on Whitehall arrangements were ignored

The Robbins Committee were anxious to protect universities from the sort of micro-management by Whitehall and local authorities that it deemed was appropriate for some other parts of the education sector.

At the forefront of their minds was the fact that 'the business of the main institutions of higher learning is not only education: it is also the advancement and preservation of knowledge.' This differentiated universities, it was argued, from schools: 'the organic connexion of the universities with other forms of organised research is even closer than their connexion with the work of the schools, important though that is'. (Paragraph 781)

The Robbins Committee wanted the machinery of government to reflect this view of the world, proposing 'a ministry whose main responsibility is for the autonomous institutions', such as universities. Furthermore, they argued it would be 'a most felicitous conjunction if this ministry were also charged with responsibility for other autonomous state-supported activities', such as the Research Councils, the Arts Council and the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries.

The Robbins Report used language that contrasts sharply with many descriptions of how England's current Office for Students regulates higher education institutions.[38] Autonomy was to be protected via the arms-length bodies sat in between the new ministry and those institutions that it was designed to oversee:

> *Since much of the work would be done through grants committees, the whole would tend to be informed by the special degree of detachment and respect for the autonomy of the institutions and individuals*

> *ultimately concerned that is so necessary if the connexion of the State with creative activities is to be a quickening rather than a deadening influence.* (Paragraph 784)

The Robbins Report's idea that the different functions of universities should come within the ambit of a single arm of government continues to be popular today – for example, it is a theme in a 2023 HEPI Report outlining what vice-chancellors would like to see in the next set of general election manifestos.[39]

However, the Robbins Committee went further than many others in arguing for universities to come under a single Whitehall body. They emphasised not only the importance of university teaching and research being overseen together but also opposed the idea of a single ministry for all education.

The Report argued Whitehall boundaries, which are often complained about today for creating 'silos', can actually serve as useful protections against encroachments on autonomy:

> *with a single ministry, in the event of conflict, the right of appeal would be only within the walls of the department, with two ministers it would reach the Cabinet or at least a Cabinet committee. And, from our point of view, at this stage in the evolution of the educational system, the latter possibility would be a definite, indeed an indispensable, advantage.* (Paragraph 787)

The Robbins Committee proposed the new ministry should be called 'not the Ministry of Higher Education, but the Ministry of Arts and Science.' In the event, however, higher education policy was put inside the new Department of Education and Science.

This reality did not convince Robbins to change his mind. He later told the House of Lords that the new arrangements were putting universities in the firing line: 'If higher education had had separate representation at ministerial discussions, I wonder very much whether the recent cuts in educational expenditure would have fallen so heavily on this sector.'[40]

Despite Robbins' opposition to the arrangements, the Department of Education and Science lasted for around 30 years and had high-profile Secretaries of State, including Quintin Hogg, Margaret Thatcher and Shirley Williams.

Since 1992, however, responsibility for science and research policy has bounced around. It has been in: the Cabinet Office (1992-95); the Department of Trade and Industry (1995-2007); the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007-09); the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009-16); the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) (2016-23); and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) (2023 onwards).

It is intriguing to ponder what Robbins might have made of these various successive arrangements, although it seems probable that he would have disliked the constant churn.

When he was the Minister for Universities and Science in BIS from 2010 to 2014, David Willetts argued the arrangements then in place made sense: science was linked to universities under one minister who attended Cabinet and who was situated in a Department that understood research, meaning the position was 'as close to Robbins' vision for the machinery of Government as we have ever been.'[41]

However, Andy Westwood, who served as Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (John Denham) from 2007 to 2009, argued a merger of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and BIS would have been necessary to implement Robbins's plan in full.[42]

The arrangements in place from 2023, with the new DSIT, ensure research has a dedicated place at the Cabinet table. But the Department for Education retains responsibility for much higher education policy. So the structure Robbins proposed remains unimplemented.

Conclusions

In some areas, the Robbins Report is very much a document of its time. For example, it is likely that few academics today will recognise the picture that the Robbins Committee painted of academic life in the early 1960s:

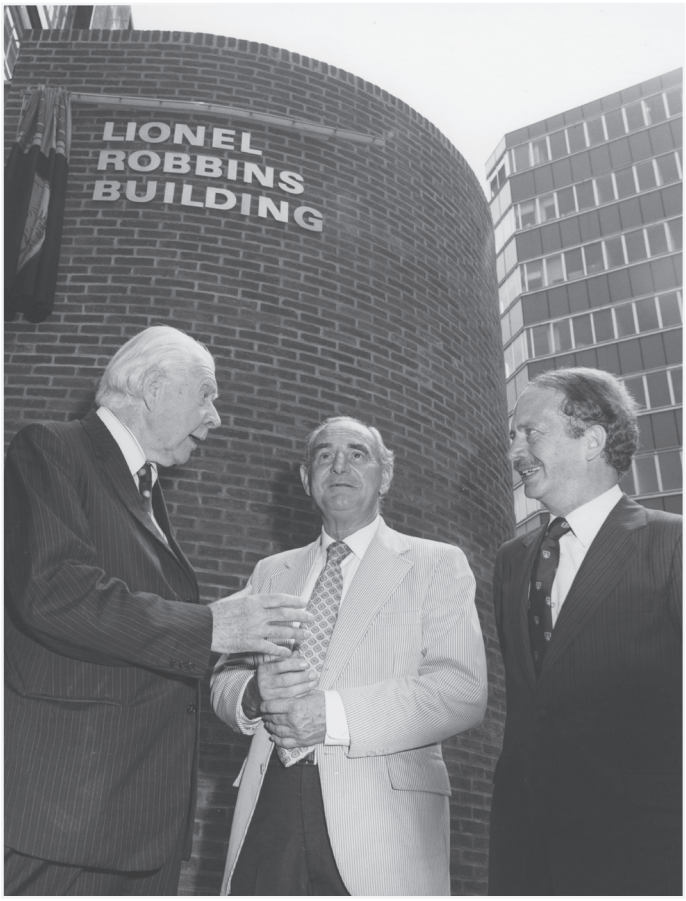
> *The university teacher in particular has a unique freedom in arranging his work and in following his own bent. On paper the hours of work demanded of him are not heavy. He does not have to submit to office hours and has a wide liberty in the interpretation of his professional duties.* (Paragraph 598)

This gendered language, while common for the time and reflecting the very uneven male / female ratio among academic staff, also serves as a reminder that just one-in-four full-time students were women in the early 1960s as were only two of the 12 members of the Robbins Committee itself.

Yet 60 years on, the Robbins Report continues to reverberate through Whitehall, in universities and among policymakers more generally. It is such a rich and broad report – six times longer than the 60-page Browne report of 2010 even excluding the multiple lengthy Appendices[43] – that, in one sense, its impact is not surprising. But few reports manage to be so relevant for so long.

Despite the Robbins Report's continuing resonance, however, many of the key recommendations were not implemented in the way the Committee had hoped. If the Robbins Report had been accepted in full, there would have been no binary divide between polytechnics and universities, no Department of Education and Science and some new universities that did not come to exist.

Lord Robbins even complained that Anthony Crosland made changes that were 'diametrically opposed to the conceptions which inspired our recommendations.'[44]



Lord Robbins, Sir Huw Wheldon (Chair, LSE), Professor Dahrendorf (Director, LSE), July 1978

The Report's importance lies instead in the enduring relevance of the issues which it raised, on the manner in which the answers to these issues were revealed (such as the methodology used for assessing student demand) and in the long-term expansionist direction of travel that it proposed for ensuring a better educated populace.

Even the Robbins Report's asides echo through the decades. For example, the Robbins Committee stood against entrenched stratification in the higher education sector: 'There should be no freezing of institutions into established hierarchies; on the contrary there should be recognition and encouragement of excellence wherever it exists and wherever it appears.' (Paragraph 37)

This remains apposite as institutions continue to digest the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework[45] and Knowledge Exchange Framework results, both of which are designed to shake up existing hierarchies, along with the last set of Research Excellence Framework results. On the other hand, the level of bureaucracy in such schemes may have seemed unthinkable six decades ago.

Above all, the Robbins Report's recognition of the cultural, social and economic value of higher education continues to stand out like a beacon and in part because it is so starkly different to some recent political rhetoric about higher education.

Society, the Robbins Committee believed, rests almost entirely on education:

> *If a series of nuclear explosions were to wipe out the material equipment of the world but the educated citizens survived, it need not be long before former standards were reconstituted; but if it destroyed the educated citizens, even though it left the buildings and machines intact, a period longer than the Dark Ages might elapse before the former position was restored.* (Paragraph 625)

Were any political party tempted to commit to a new broad review of higher education in their manifesto for the next general election, the Robbins Committee could be a good model to follow – even though the Robbins Report itself rejected such *ad hoc* arrangements and favoured 'an authoritative and permanent body that could be asked from time to time to review the whole of higher education'. (Paragraph 796)

However, a modern Robbins review would be unlikely to provide a ready solution for the challenges facing today's higher education institutions for two important reasons.

First, the Robbins Report's progress was slow, given its comprehensive nature. Gathering evidence, then writing and publishing the Report took 32 months – more than half the lifetime of the 1959 to 1964 Parliament – and then policymakers chose what they liked from it rather than swallowing it whole.

Secondly, the biggest challenges facing higher education institutions now are generally regarded to be financial and, from today's vantage point, the Robbins Report seems remarkably cavalier about the long-term financial challenges of paying for the student numbers that it foresaw.

The Committee predicted a doubling in the proportion of gross national product spent on higher education, from 0.8% to 1.6%, but largely dodged the question of how to pay for this:

> *public money is spent on what people want; and if they want more higher education, then, on the estimates we have made, it should be possible to finance it without imposing intolerable strains on the budget or the economy.* (Paragraph 636)

This slack attitude to public expenditure is notable partly because one reason why the Robbins Report was established in the first place was to get more of a handle on the costs of expansion:

> *From 1957 to 1962 expenditure on universities doubled. A major capital programme had been authorised. Seven new universities had been designated. Student numbers had risen and undertakings had been given they would rise further. … the universities were in effect Exchequer-financed, and as the cost and public importance of the universities increased this could not go on indefinitely without some review, some independent* document de base *on which the future could be founded.*[46]

The Robbins prediction of greater public spending on higher education as student numbers rose undoubtedly came true, though it fell back during the 1980s (reaching, for example, 1% of GDP in 1986/87[47]), before rising again in the 1990s.

By the time of the Dearing Report in 1997, higher education absorbed 1.4% of GDP, nearly all of which was public expenditure.[48] However, by 1996/97, the number of full-time students had reached 1.1 million, meaning lower spending per student (in real terms) than envisaged at the time of the Robbins Report.[49]

The cost burden has since fallen more directly on the beneficiaries via fees and loan repayments, enabling further expansion. By 2021/22, the number of full-time students had doubled to 2.3 million (including 0.6 million from overseas, a much higher proportion than the one-in-10 of the early 1960s).

OECD data suggest the UK spends 2.0% of gross domestic product (GDP) on tertiary education.[50] While there is more than one way to classify spending on the highest levels of education, only one-quarter is categorised as 'public'. The rest, classified as 'private', is proportionately greater than in any other country tracked by the OECD.

As a rough rule of thumb, since the Robbins Report's expansionary vision the number of full-time students has risen ten-fold while the country is three-and-a-half times richer. Yet public spending on higher education as a proportion of GDP has not increased. Something like two-thirds of the costs have landed on graduates through loans.

So it seems safe to conclude that the Robbins Report's discussion of the public expenditure consequences of higher education expansion, which is still a pressing outstanding policy question today, had limited influence on policymaking.

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