

The  
**BOW**  
GROUP

POLICY IN THE MAKING

**A FAIR  
DEAL FOR  
STUDENTS**

by Francis Ingham



## About the Bow Group

The Bow Group has three aims:

- To create new and thought-provoking research for the Conservative Party
- To provide a forum for its members to meet each other socially
- To provide opportunities for its members to meet senior Party figures to discuss the issues of the day

The Group has no corporate view, which allows it to approach each issue on its merits and with an open mind. Accordingly, the views expressed in Bow Group publications are those of the authors, and do not represent a statement of Conservative Party policy, or the views of other members of the Group.

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# Chapter One: Executive Summary

## • **Failing the Student.**

Never before have so many young people been in Higher Education, and never before have the benefits of going to university been so nebulous. Unthinking expansion of Britain's universities and the academic refusal to treat students as paying customers is devaluing degrees. Britain's Higher Education system is crucially flawed. Our universities no longer provide young people with good value for money.

There are three fundamental reasons why attending university is less beneficial than it should be:

### **Qualification Inflation.**

The number of students in Higher Education has risen fitfully throughout the last fifty years, and dramatically during the last 20. Governments have done this in the name of enhancing the skills of Britain's workforce, but over recent years the evidence of this happening has simply failed to materialise. A degree is now nothing more than the paper requirement for entry into an increasing number of occupations. In truth, unthinking expansion has harmed, not helped, Britain.

### **Degree Inflation.**

Degree classification has undergone the same debasement suffered in GCSE and A-Level marking. Whereas once it was the norm to award 2:2 degrees, 2:1s are now the expected standard. There are an increasing number of higher learning institutions, each of them awarding higher degree classifications than ever before. The value of a degree has consequently fallen, bringing with it a reduced financial return to students on their three or four years of investment.

### **Poor Teaching Standards.**

The funding method employed by the Government does nothing to encourage higher standards of teaching. It offers no particular rewards for good teaching, and imposes no especial penalties for poor teaching. As a result, there has been a gradual fall in standards over the past twenty years, and a steep one since the end of the binary system in 1992. University staff now teach a higher number of students than ever before – a major reason for declining academic standards.

## • **Building Better Universities.**

Even if tertiary education were still free at the point of delivery, Britain's system would face serious problems. But both political parties have rightly reformed the universities so that students pay university tuition fees, and an income-linked re-payment of their living expenses. Recent comments by the Russell Group in favour of the introduction of selected top-up fees show how the whole thrust of the education debate is in favour of students paying increasingly more for their university education. Our university system needs to be fundamentally reformed so that students are treated as the paying customers they have now become.

Instead of the present inertia apparent in Britain's Higher Education system, radical change should be implemented. Universities should be set free to govern themselves, and students should be guaranteed a better deal for their time and money. The five reforms advocated by this paper would use transparency and competition to return our universities to the world pre-eminence which their Civil Service culture threatens to destroy.

### **1. Funding by Results not Numbers**

Making universities financially free of the state by granting them endowments would be the ideal way of funding them. However, until it is possible to extend endowments to all universities, the next Government must find a new way of funding Higher Education. To encourage higher standards, it should link funding to results.

### **2. Funding by Department not University**

Good universities contain bad departments and vice versa. One of Britain's problems is that in trying to excel in too many subjects, it ends up excelling in too few. The Government should encourage universities to specialise in their areas of academic strength by allocating funding by Department rather than by University.

### **3. A Free Academic Marketplace**

If universities are to attract the staff they need to compete successfully in the newly-emerging worldwide education market, then better teachers must be attracted. To this end, universities should radically reform the way they recruit and pay their staff, dealing with them as individuals rather than as quasi-civil servants.

### **4. A Reformed Examination System**

For standards to be raised, they must be transparent and directly comparable. A flaw in Britain's university system is that each university effectively sets its own standards and uses its own marking system. The Government should introduce a beefed-up external examination system, to raise standards across the whole sector, and ensure uniform marking of degrees.

### **5. Creation of a Single Quality Control Body**

Instead of the bewildering array of Quangos and Government agencies monitoring standards, one single body should be charged with scrutinising teaching standards and degree classifications. It should assess the teaching of academics, and verify or moderate the final degree classifications they award.

These reforms would simultaneously make universities free from unnecessary government interference, and give their students a better deal for their time and money. They would raise standards throughout the tertiary sector, and ensure Britain's continued existence as a world centre of academic excellence.

By introducing Conservative principles into one of the last remaining bastions of workplace conservatism, we would greatly enhance the prospects of university students, and of universities too. Presented correctly, these reforms would show that we were again politically interested in education, and that we had ideas on how to improve it. They would add substantially to our armoury against a Labour Party seen to be moving education down its agenda.

# Chapter Two: Introduction

## • The Political Case for Change.

Education matters directly to everyone in a way that such public good services as Defence and Social Security do not; it figures in voters' daily lives in a more frequent - albeit less dramatic - way than the NHS. The great majority of British voters have experienced state education at some point in their lives – whether at primary, secondary or tertiary level - and often at all three. Every voter spends at least 11 years in education, and under the Government's plans, approaching half of all new voters will have spent sixteen or more. Quite simply, our experience of Britain's education system shapes our view of the country we are part of.

Even if we have little interest in the quality of education on offer when we ourselves are students, we do take seriously educational standards if and when we have children.

Blair's Government claimed to put education at the top of its agenda, but despite much talk of radical reform, little positive has actually been achieved. Both in Britain's schools and Britain's universities, Labour have promised much and delivered nothing. Education's return to the top of Labour's agenda during election season shows only that the Government understands the rhetorical importance of the issue, even while it steadfastly does nothing to address it.

It is also an area where the Conservative Party has traditionally been strong. Throughout the 1980s, we were the parents' friend against the entrenched interests of the teaching establishment. We were consistently trusted more than Labour because we put children's education above union friendship.

Our record in the 1990s was not so happy. We added bureaucracy to schools, and failed to extend choice and quality as parents wanted. We alienated parents and gave the impression of disinterestedness in the subject. We handed education to Labour, and it is only recently that they have let it go. It is time we grabbed the issue back, and the Party's commitment to educational devolution is a great step towards doing so.

But what is too often overlooked in the debate about raising standards in education is the importance of Britain's universities. This paper seeks to address that oversight.

## • Students Matter.

University undergraduates and postgraduates have votes. With the Government aiming to have 50% of young people attending university by 2010<sup>2</sup>, political parties risk alienating huge numbers of voters if they simply ignore Higher Education

Labour's record on university reform could hardly be better crafted to lose it thousands of votes. As recent polling research has shown, their abolition of the

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Blair, 28-9-1999.

Maintenance Grant and introduction of Tuition Fees have turned swathes of left-leaning university students away from their natural Party. Labour have heaped financial burdens upon students without even attempting to increase the value of their degrees.

The Conservative Party has set out strong and potentially popular policies on schools, and has proposed the radical step of endowing successful universities, but it has yet to put forward a complete programme for Higher Education. Given the failings of this Government, it would be foolish to ignore the golden opportunities presented here. We should reach out to the thousands of disillusioned students in university campuses throughout Britain.

It would be ridiculous for Conservatives to argue that we could turn back the clock to the 1970s, and massively subsidise student lifestyles through general taxation. Offering substantial amounts of taxpayers' money to students without any responsibility other than to enjoy themselves and to enhance their own career prospects is not on the agenda of any serious political body. Taxpayers cannot afford to confer those luxuries, and there is no reason why they should be asked to do so.

Conservatives can however create a new balance in university education, so that the value of having a degree justifies the cost of obtaining one. The appropriate Tory response to an increase in the cost of getting a degree is an increase in the value added by a university education. Otherwise, the young people who are being encouraged by the Government to enter Higher Education are simply receiving an ever worse deal.

Conservatives should concentrate on creating a new contract between students, universities and the Government, where universities are both more free of Government, and more responsive to the needs and aspirations of their students. We should accept that Tuition Fees, and the abolition of the Maintenance Grant, are now established facts of university life. Instead of trying to turn back the clock, we should improve the quality of Higher Education, and make universities more responsive to student need.

We should return to our natural position as the friend of the consumer, and the challenger of vested interests. That means introducing competition into universities, and improving the standard of teaching on offer. Such a programme would show that we have original and realistic ideas on an area vital to the future of our country. Labour's university policy is extremely weak: It is time for Conservatives to reopen the Higher Education debate.

# Chapter Three: The System We Have

## • Flaws in the System

The crucial flaw in Britain's Higher Education system is that it lacks any coherent organising principle. Having evolved over hundreds of years, it is a hotchpotch of outdated ideas and political compromises. Conservatives often hold organic development to be best. But in Higher Education's case, it most certainly is not.

Reforms carried out by both Conservative and Labour Governments have made the student give a great deal more than just his time for the privilege of a university degree. The clear trend is towards ever growing numbers of young people paying ever more money to complete their education. If our Higher Education system gave young people a clear advantage in the employment market, then this might well be a desirable development. Evidence suggests however that this is not the case, and that students are being short-changed by both their universities and their Government.

Britain's entire university system militates against excellent academic standards, and in favour of mediocrity. Fifty years of exhaustive interference by the state have had a profoundly detrimental effect on how our universities function. It is difficult to think of a system better calculated to marginalize the consumer, or provide worse value for money for the taxpayer. Radical reform of the university system is in the interest of everyone concerned. Taxpayers must get a better deal for the finance they provide, and students must be treated as paying customers. Academics too must be enabled to work in surroundings where ability and commitment are rewarded rather than ignored. The state must interfere less in the running of universities and start interfering better.

### • Poor Teaching Standards.

There are three major hurdles to the improvement of educational standards in Britain's universities, each of them created by the actions of government:

#### 1. Student to Staff Ratios.

In 1982, Britain had 800,000 university students; today, it has 1.7 million. While Labour's aim for half of all young people to study at university may be headline-catching, it actually palls when compared to the massive increases brought about during the central years of Conservative Government.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the number of staff employed by Britain's universities has remained almost static. In 1972, when 7% of young people participated in Higher Education, Britain employed 30,000 academic staff. By 1994, student numbers had risen by over 400%; staff numbers by less than 10%.

**During those years, the Staff to Student Ratio (SSR) rose from around 16**

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Lange - *Rethinking Higher Education*, December 1998. Years refer to 1982-1995. In 1982, Higher Education taught 555,000 full time students and 3000,000 part time ones. By 1995, it was teaching 1.14 million full members and 558,000 part timers.

**students per member of the teaching staff to almost 31.** Since 1980, the broader ratio including not just teaching staff, but also all non-manual staff, went from 9 per students per employee to 17.

Given the current educational debate, this seems a bizarre policy. In no area of education other than Higher is the argument advanced that the number of students for whom each teacher is responsible has no effect on the quality of teaching, or the level of knowledge imparted. This Government has made it a central tenet of its education policy that class sizes must be reduced if standards are to be raised. In this context, it is worth noting that while the ratio of staff to students has doubled in Higher Education since 1980, it has remained almost static in schools<sup>4</sup>.

Present research shows that SSRs have a major impact on university quality. Not only does Britain's lowest rated university also have the country's worst SSR, but almost without exception the universities with the highest SSRs are also the universities independently given the worst teaching assessments<sup>5</sup>.

Governments however have proved incapable of correcting the growing disparity between staff and student numbers, or even admitting that the number of students each teacher is responsible for affects the quality of teaching. Even the CVCP, a thoroughly Blairite institution, which talks glowingly of combating "the forces of conservatism" is critical of the Government's expansion plans, arguing that they cannot be introduced within the current spending limits<sup>6</sup>.

This disparity has profound consequences for the quality of taught courses in universities. Any realistic assessment of the future of the universities must either increase the number of teaching staff, or else reduce the number of students. The first is a prospect which Labour refuse to discuss, while the second would be an unacceptable admission of failure. Labour is committed to the expansion of Higher Education, even at the cost of devaluing university quality.

## **2. Funding Mechanisms.**

Governments have historically chosen to fund universities by a one size fits all method. It has taken a simple head count of enrolment numbers, and allocated funding accordingly. While it has discriminated between the costs of teaching (for example between arts and science courses), it has made no discrimination on the quality of teaching.

There are several measures by which this system is flawed. It is blind to the quality of courses taught, the value added to a young person's career prospects, or even the percentage of students who start a course but later drop out. The incentives for universities are all the wrong way round. Universities are financially encouraged constantly to increase the number of young people they accept to study.

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<sup>4</sup> 1980: 18.2 school pupils per teacher, 1997 18.3 school pupils per teacher. AUTPay Claim 2000-2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Sunday Times Higher Education Guide 2000*. Of the 33 universities for teaching quality, 27 are also in the top third for low SSR's. Of the bottom 33 teaching universities, 25 are also in the bottom third SSR's.

<sup>6</sup> CVCP *Investing in Universities and for Colleges for Global Success, Review 2000*.

This has been part of the Government's policy to expand Higher Education, and –according to its own terms- it has proved remarkably successful.

The quality of degree taught is bound to be put at risk if universities continue to be funded on a pure headcount basis, when the amount being paid per head continues to fall. Standards have certainly declined over the last few decades, and Labour's current aspiration to increase participation rates by at least another 10% of the 18-30 generation will only make them slip still further.

### **3. No Quality Control.**

Whatever the rhetoric of Governments and universities, standards have fallen dramatically over recent times. Partly because of the increase in student numbers, and partly because of the unification of the Higher system, a degree is no longer as impressive as once it was.

The rapid expansion of Higher Education has brought major quality control problems. With the enormous increase in the number of degrees being granted since the 1960s in general, and since the mid-1980s in particular, the standard of Britain's degree has come more sharply into focus.

At the heart of the issue is the way universities classify degrees. Universities –rightly- are notoriously protective of their independence, and have managed to retain effective freedom over the marking of examination scripts. An undergraduate's department will not simply teach him his degree, it will also set the papers which examine how well he has learnt what they have taught him, and it will mark that paper, to decide what class of degree he will be awarded.

This system is obviously open to abuse by tutors, who become both the vehicle of teaching, and the watchdog of its quality. This flaw has long been recognised, but the method chosen to solve it could scarcely be less effective. The system of so-called external examination is flawed, and provides no effective guarantee of even minimum standards. Its crucial failure is that it allows university departments to themselves choose their external examiners.

In theory, this system might be able to enforce and enhance academic standards, with universities choosing robust external examiners committed to high standards. In reality however, the present funding system encourages the appointment of weak examiners. So long as the Government encourages rapid increases in student numbers and allocates funding on a simplistic basis, universities will be encouraged to use lax external examiners. Presently, there is no financial motive for universities to get tough on poor standards: Instead, they have a pecuniary incentive to maintain weak standards and score more highly in the presently crude league tables.

### **• A Worsening Deal for Graduates**

Graduates still get quite a good deal for their time and their money, but that deal is continually getting worse. There is now growing evidence both that graduates are being employed in jobs which do not demand a university education (and which were filled previously by non-graduates), and that thousands are entering the employment arena literally unemployed.

The move from an industrial, labour intensive economy to a service-led, skills intensive one has led Governments since the 1950s to emphasize the value of

education. The current Government has correctly seen that the workforce needs to be better trained and more flexible than ever before. It talks of globalisation and the challenge of facing competition in a worldwide village. From this premise, the argument goes that in a world where distance becomes an ever less relevant consideration, training and education become ever more important.

Unfortunately, the Government's response to these challenges is flawed. Rather than enhancing the training and education on offer, they have taken the easy option of simply increasing the number of people entering Higher Education. Labour's 2009 target makes it simply the latest in a long line of British Governments expanding Higher Education in order to gain a competitive edge.

The unpleasant truth however is that it is not the number of people studying at a Higher level that is important, but instead the quality of the education they receive. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Britain had a higher proportion of its population in Higher Education than Germany and Japan, yet was overtaken on every relevant economic measure. In like manner, it is interesting to note that the Robbins Report of 1963 admirably highlighted the success of the Soviet Union in achieving a higher level of involvement in universities than any other country <sup>7</sup>! Whatever its proponents may contend, there is no definite link between how long someone spends in education, and how productive they are.

#### • **Graduate Unemployment and Underemployment.**

There are many perceived social benefits to going to university. For most students it is their first time away from home on a sustained basis, and the place where they learn most about life. However, the principal reason for attending university is still the belief that a university degree confers a higher earning ability, and enhanced career prospects. Apart from being a lifestyle choice, and an opportunity to develop wider cultural experiences and tastes, going to university is primarily an economic consideration: Young people are basically making an investment in their future. One very positive consequence of the introduction of Tuition Fees is that would-be university students are made to think more seriously about the end value of their investment.

The expansion of Higher Education has radically lowered the value of a student's degree. When Britain's universities taught roughly 5% of the young adult population, investing in a university education gave a guaranteed career return. Possession of a degree was a recognized passport to a better career. The state was happy to fund universities -and their students- liberally because of the perceived public benefits to the state from a well educated elite, while young people were more than happy to exchange three or four years for the private benefits of university.

Now though, all that has changed. The state continues to emphasize the private value of a university education, but it now expects the young to contribute towards its costs. It still believes in a mainly publicly funded Higher Education system, but it refuses to accept the extra costs which expansion has brought.

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<sup>7</sup> Robbins's Committee on Higher Education, 1963.

At the same time, the private returns to a university investment have fallen sharply. Degree certificates now serve as a screening process for future employers; the first hurdle to be cleared by a young person, rather than the last.

### **1. Unemployment.**

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 6 months after leaving university, a staggering 10% of graduates will still be unemployed<sup>8</sup>. While levels of graduate unemployment are approximately equivalent among all degree subjects, they vary markedly between universities. Six months after graduation, an Oxford student has only a 3% chance of being unemployed: a Surrey graduate just 1%. In contrast, 14% of Paisley graduates will be unemployed, and 19% of University of East London alumni<sup>9</sup>.

It will come as little surprise to those sceptical of continuing expansion, that of the ten universities with the worst levels of graduate unemployment, six are also in the top ten for enhanced "access"<sup>10</sup>. When universities expand in pursuit of reaching artificial targets set by the Government, they often accept young people who simply will not benefit from a university education. The people accepted to do meaningless courses with poor chances of ultimately getting a job are being used by both the Government and their universities. Extending "Access" has become a symbol of a supposedly One Nation approach to Higher education, but all too often it is nothing more a symbol of high unemployment.

### **2. Underemployment.**

There is no evidence that continued expansion of Higher Education benefits either the country, or the individuals concerned. Instead, unless more jobs are created that actually need graduate-level skills, then graduates are simply wasting their time and money. As Seville says:

*"if the expansion of Higher Education simply means that more and more young people have degrees, so increasing numbers of jobs require graduates rather than lower-level qualifications, then it may be that no-one is better off than before the expansion started."<sup>11</sup>*

This is hardly a new issue. 25 years ago, Ronald Dore summed up the problem with his librarian example. He argued that whereas at the beginning of the century, an interest in books, and a reasonable ability at organisation were the only requirements for becoming a librarian, by the 1950s, they were a school certificate, and by the 1970s, they had increased to A Levels. With further qualification inflation since Dore wrote, it is not too much to say that the modern-day requirement has moved on from A-Levels, and to at least a degree, and more often a Masters or more. Dore's succinct summation for the problem was that:

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<sup>8</sup> HESA, 27-6-2000.

<sup>9</sup> *Sunday Times Higher Education Guide 2000.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Radical Implications of Modularity*, Adrian Seville, 1997.

*"libraries can get such people with higher level certificates, and they need to recruit such people if they are to go on recruiting men and women with the same degree of librarian potential as those they were recruiting fifty years earlier."*<sup>12</sup>

There is clear evidence that young people are staying on longer than ever before in education, simply in order to be qualified for lower skilled jobs than in the past. A 1996 report followed three cohorts of graduates through the jobs market<sup>13</sup>. It discovered that up to three years after graduating, over half believed that their job did not require their level of qualifications. One in ten knew that their position had previously been filled by a non-graduate, while 20 per cent of humanities graduates were employed in secretarial or clerical work. Overall, *three-fifths* of graduates described themselves as underemployed in their work, lacking intellectual stimulation or challenge<sup>14</sup>.

What makes these findings even more shocking is that they are not new; they are simply an old problem getting rapidly worse. As long ago as the 1960s, when the last major expansion of Higher Education took place, the Robbins Report found essentially the same evidence of graduate underemployment. It heard evidence that around a fifth of graduates with a science or technology based degree were *"in categories of employment in which it is unlikely they were making full use of their qualifications."*<sup>15</sup> A Government Report in 1990 stated that *"Britain already has considerably more in the way of qualified labour than it can absorb in any capacity."*<sup>16</sup>

Despite all this evidence, Governments have continued to advocate the expansion of Higher Education. There is nothing wrong per se with expansion. It is certainly true that in times of economic growth, demand for graduates appears to increase. This was true of the 1960s technological advances, and it will probably be true of the new knowledge economy today. Where the problem lies however is in defining the rate of growth in graduate numbers which is economically sustainable. As the early 1990s showed, graduate programmes are often the first to be cut back during recessions. It is also obvious that there is not unlimited growth potential for graduate recruitment. A Britain in which 100% of young people went to university would simply be a Britain with better educated benefit claimants than ever before.

The flaw in Government rhetoric, and in particular Labour's current rhetoric, is the failure to acknowledge that there is a cap on the number of graduates from whom the economy can benefit. Young people are done no favours whatsoever if they are encouraged to go to university only to fill positions recently vacated by 18-year old school leavers. Unfortunately, that is an increasingly common situation.

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<sup>12</sup> The Diploma Disease, Ronald Dore, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> *What Do Graduates Really Do?* Institute for Employment Studies, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Robbins'Committee on Higher Education, 1963.

<sup>16</sup> *Highly Qualifies People: Supply and Demand*, 1990

# Chapter Four: The Evidence of Failure

## • The Evidence of Divided Institutions.

*"The binary divide remains –despite the acquisition of university status by the former polytechnics- ...if anything, the divide has become more, not less pronounced in recent years."*

*-The Dearing Report.*

The expansion of university education and the present system of examination would be enough in themselves to raise doubts about the quality of Britain's degrees. It is intuitively incompatible to extend the intake of universities without diluting the quality of that intake. There is also however a large body of documentary evidence to support these concerns, stretching throughout the last five years, and investigated by independent sources.

- In 1996, figures were published detailing the quality of research carried out in the UK's universities. They showed a clearly defined premier league with Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, UCL and Imperial substantially ahead of their rivals. Not one of the top 21 highest-rated universities was a former polytechnic, while the new universities were all clustered at the bottom end of the table<sup>17</sup>.
- At the same time, a detailed study was carried out into the teaching quality of Britain's universities. Its finding mirrored the examination of research quality, proving that poor research results are not simply the result of concentrating efforts on teaching instead. Of the 99 universities graded, the best former polytechnic came in at number 34, with the tail again composed predominantly of other new universities<sup>18</sup>.
- Earlier this year, the Quality Assurance Agency expressed concerns that the "dumbing down" of university courses is increasing the divide between the best academic institutions, and the less academically demanding<sup>19</sup>. Summaries of some 500 reports investigating the quality of teaching in 16 divergent subjects showed numerous courses lacking in academic rigour, and leading to high drop out rates. Again, the worst universities were predominantly former polytechnics.
- Six months earlier, the Sunday Times Higher Education Guide<sup>20</sup> showed that these poor teaching and research findings were still translating into generally poor performance. Out of the 99 institutions evaluated, the top 51 were all old universities; the bottom 35 all former polytechnics.<sup>21</sup>

What is clear from independent reports over the past five years therefore is that whatever the rhetoric, a major divide still exists in Britain's Higher Education system. Former polytechnics which should have closed the gap on older universities are still stuck rigidly at the bottom of the academic league on every

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<sup>17</sup> Higher Education Funding Councils, 19-12-1996.

<sup>18</sup> Higher Education Funding Councils, 4-1-1996.

<sup>19</sup> *Quality Assessment of Materials Technology 1996-1998*, 11-3-2000.

<sup>20</sup> Composed of figures from independent and government bodies.

<sup>21</sup> *Sunday Times University Guide*, 17-9-2000.

academic comparison. The inevitable result of such wide disparities is a diminution in the value attached by both employers, and prospective foreign students, to the British degree system in general.

Quite simply, all universities are not the same, and the pretence that they are serves only to devalue the degrees that all of them offer.

#### • **The Evidence of Declining Standards.**

*"Universities near the bottom of the academic league are awarding a higher proportion of first and upper second class degrees than some of those at the top."*

*-John Clare, Education Editor, Daily Telegraph.<sup>22</sup>*

It is not just that there is a gap between the teaching and research abilities of the established universities compared to their more youthful peers. There is also evidence that university standards as a whole have dropped. In 1997, the Dearing Report heard evidence that sixth formers were entering universities with lower academic abilities (though not with fewer qualifications) than ever before.

Dearing was presented with a survey of 809 academics, revealing not only a division between the views of those at old universities and their colleagues at the former polytechnics, but also a wide belief that the standards of new students were falling generally. 38% of lecturers at established universities said the quality of students had declined, along with 56% of lecturers at former polytechnics.<sup>23</sup>

Given this evidence that standards have fallen as universities have been encouraged to accept more students than previously, it would be natural to expect the proportion of students awarded high degree classifications to have fallen also. In fact, precisely the opposite has happened, with more students being awarded higher degrees than ever before. At the former polytechnic of Loughborough for instance, where an HEFCE report had found standards *"a matter of serious concern"*<sup>24</sup>, the percentage of students awarded a first or a 2:1 had increased from 40% to 74% over the space of five years. Likewise, when reviewing the General Engineering department of De Montford University, inspectors noted *"the distribution of honours degree classifications appears normal, but it is difficult to relate this to input levels....Standards have been eroded."*<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the problem is not confined to former polytechnics. At Kings College London, the pass mark for Electrical Engineering had been lowered to 33%, a level which the examiners said *"conflicts with adequately rigorous preparation for a professional career."*<sup>26</sup> At Bradford, another established university, the pass mark for Civil Engineering was only 25%, while at Kent the external examiners –supposedly in place to ensure quality- played only a "limited role in the assurance of standards."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 1-7-2000.

<sup>23</sup> Dearing Report, 23-7-1997.

<sup>24</sup> HEFCE Report, 8-7-1998.

<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> *ibid*

Worryingly, these are not isolated incidents, but appear to be part of a long-term trend in British academia. Between 1986/87 and 1996/97, the proportion of firsts awarded by the old universities rose almost across the board. Of Britain's 53 old universities, only 7 failed to award a higher percentage of firsts than ten years previously. Of the other 46, five doubled their percentage of firsts, with Lampeter increasing theirs by a factor of seven. Whilst Oxford increased their awards from 14.2% to 15.1%, Cambridge rose by a full ten points, from 18.7% to 28.7%;<sup>28</sup> Serious questions about standards beg to be asked when a university sees fit to award almost a third of its degrees at the highest level.

The proportion of firsts awarded by newer universities also seems questionable. While their percentage terms are generally at the lower end of the market, they are in many cases nonetheless at the levels awarded by old universities ten years previously. Westminster University awards the highest percentage of firsts out of all the former polytechnics, at 7.9%. Ten years ago, only 15 *universities* matched that level, while 38 institutions awarded less. Teeside University, roundly condemned for its poor teaching and research standards in independent reports in 1996 and 1997, currently awards a higher percentage of firsts than Cardiff University did ten years previously, and almost the same percentage as Queen's College Belfast did.<sup>29</sup>

Late last year, the Vice-Chancellor of one of Britain's leading universities highlighted the discrepancy between performance in A-Levels and performance at degree level in former polytechnics. Professor Ron Cooke presented figures showing that students with very low A-Level results attending degree courses at universities in the bottom half of the academic structure have a better chance of being awarded a first or an upper second than A-Level high-fliers attending more academically select universities.<sup>30</sup>

His examples bear consideration for the disturbing light they throw on the quality protection measures supposedly in place, but apparently failing to deliver uniformly high standards. At York's Physics and Astronomy department –one of only 8 in the country to have been awarded full marks by Quality Assurance Agency inspectors, students entered with an average A-Level point score of 25, equating to slightly better than 3 Bs. 40 percent of these students were awarded a 2:1 or higher. At Portsmouth, where the Physics department is rated the worst in the country, the average A-Level points score for its students is 10- equivalent to 2 Ds and an E. Portsmouth awards 43% of its graduates a first or an upper second. At Nottingham Trent, where the Physics Department is rated at the same level as York, 65 percent of graduates leave with a 2:1 or above.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of this grade inflation however is that these figures show only the percentages of students with the highest level degrees, not the actual numbers. Not only is an ever-greater percentage of students being awarded the highest level of degrees, but there are also more students than ever before.

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ibid.

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ibid.

30 *Daily Telegraph*, 1-8-2000.

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ibid.

Given the Government's desire to extend Higher Education to 50% of the 18-30 age group by 2009, and the record of old universities –let alone the former polytechnics- exacerbating grade inflation problems, there is every reason to feel concerned about the future quality of the British degree. Unless radical measures are introduced to counter classification inflation, the problems of graduate unemployment and underemployment will simply get worse.

- **The Evidence of Academic Stagnation.**

*"Too few of our best people are attracted to university careers. And they are right. It is now a poor career."*

- David Triesman, General Secretary, Association of University teachers<sup>32</sup>.

While the number of staff employed by universities and colleges has remained essentially static over recent years, over 300,000 people still earn their living from universities. Since 1981, those people have seen their pay rise by 18% less than the private sector, and also by substantially less than for non-manual workers in the public sector. There is strong evidence that most university staff groups are now paid substantially below market medians threatening the quality of degrees on offer, and the reputation of Britain's universities.

- **Poor Academic Morale.**

Academics are depressed: That was the finding of an intensive study of university teaching staff carried out last year, by psychologists from the Universities of Luton and Hertfordshire<sup>33</sup>. Interviewing nearly 800 staff, they found that almost three-quarters believed their working conditions had changed too radically too swiftly, and that more than half thought they had changed for the worse.

80 percent of respondents argued that they now found their jobs more demanding, while 72 percent believed they worked "substantially" longer hours than previously. More disturbingly, 25 percent reported that they had taken time off work due to some kind of stress-related illness in the past twelve months, while 53 percent claimed poor psychological health in general, including depression and sleeplessness.<sup>34</sup>

None of this indicates a workforce able to deliver the teaching excellence required by the increased financial burdens being placed on students. Over half of all respondents said they wished they had chosen a different career, and equal numbers admitted to having given serious consideration to leaving the profession, mostly through early retirement. As the Guardian concluded of the survey:

*"The level of pressure experienced by academic staff, coupled with the very low average levels of psychological health are likely to have placed significant constraints on their effectiveness. This, in turn, has implications for academic quality and the student experience"*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *The Guardian*, 25-2-2000

<sup>33</sup> Gail Kinman, Department of Psychology, University of Luton, and Fiona Jones, Department of Psychology, University of Hertfordshire. 12-4-2000.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *The Guardian*, 13-4-2000

- **Poor Academic Recruitment.**

University education is an increasingly global market, in which universities compete internationally to attract both students and teaching staff. As the CVCP says:

*"The UK's future international reputation in university teaching and research will depend upon the recruitment, retention and motivation of high calibre staff."*<sup>36</sup>

The relative decline of academic pay is making a career in British academia steadily less attractive. As the Brett Report makes clear, long-term relative falls in pay are producing shortfalls in academic recruitment.<sup>37</sup> In particular, Business Studies, IT, Accountancy and Engineering are areas where recruitment is becoming progressively more problematic. On the basis of an independent report, the CVCP now admits that this problem is not limited to the newer or the less well performing universities, but is endemic across all institutions.

This dearth of new staff is particularly notable at senior levels; surely an unwelcome pointer to the future. The drift overseas of top flight British academics is a trend which can only grow in pace as the education industry becomes progressively more globalised. What is true at senior levels today may well end up being true at lower levels in the future.

The report from the Industrial Relations Services argued that in "*key areas of the knowledge driven economy*", universities are proving unable to attract high calibre staff<sup>38</sup>, and being forced to "appoint academics without the necessary qualifications or experience"<sup>39</sup>. When a university advertises 13 professorships over a two year period, and is able to fill less than half, there is a pressing need for action to make an academic career more enticing<sup>40</sup>.

- **Poor Staff Retention.**

As well as growing recruitment problems, universities face major difficulties retaining the staff they do manage to recruit. A number of departments now have an existing staff profile of over 45, along with poor prospects of attracting new staff. Research from the Association of University Teachers shows that a third of academic staff over 50 are preparing for early retirement, while their potential replacements are opting for better paid jobs in foreign universities, or the private sector<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> CVCP *Investing in Universities and Colleges for Global Success*. Spending Review 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Brett Report.

<sup>38</sup> Industrial Relations Services, 24-2-2000.

<sup>39</sup> John Carvel, *The Guardian*, 25-2-2000.

<sup>40</sup> Industrial Relations Services, 24-2-2000.

<sup>41</sup> Association of University Teachers, 24-2-2000.

The current trend towards early retirement bodes ill for the future. If it continues, departments such as Engineering will find irreplaceable staff leaving. The result will either be an unequal reduction in the capacity of universities to teach particular subjects, or else a radical reduction in the standards of teaching on offer. In response to these difficulties, the Bett Report recommended minimum levels of pay for junior teaching staff. Given that the most severe problems of retention and recruitment are at the upper end of the market however, this might not be an effective answer.

- **Poor Teaching**

As students have become consumers of an expensive product, they have a right to expect high teaching standards. There is evidence however that while teaching may be excellent in certain institutions, considerable variations across the sector do exist.

Three years ago, Dearing recommended the establishment of "*transparent and improved complaints procedures*"<sup>42</sup> to cope with poor teaching. In response, universities established the Institute of Teaching and Learning. Supposed to be a watchdog for the teaching community, and a safeguard for students, the Institute has been a failure. Despite criticism from both the NUS and the Government, it remains run by academics, with membership a purely voluntary matter, producing no statistics regarding the complaints it receives. With all the evidence of declining standards, it is a watchdog without teeth.

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<sup>42</sup> Dearing Report

# Chapter Five: Principles of Reform

This paper advances 5 specific proposals, which together would radically alter the provision of Higher Education in the UK. They stem from a troika of core principles which should guide Conservative reform of our universities:

- **Standards Must be Restored**

The first principle of any reform of Higher Education is that standards must be restored. The decline in quality which has taken place throughout the Higher Education sector has damaged the reputations of academics, harmed the prospects of students, and cost the taxpayer millions of Pounds. The argument that a degree from any one university is equivalent to a degree from any other has been *"little more than a polite myth"* <sup>43</sup> for years. Instead, uniform standards must be established, so that degree results from different universities are directly comparable. The effective two-tier system of old and new universities must be ended.

- **Teaching Quality Must be Raised.**

There is ample evidence that teaching standards are inadequate in many university departments. Such disparities in standards are almost as hurtful to the reputation of the sector as a whole as general degree inflation. Proper quality control mechanisms must be established to monitor and improve academic quality, and universities must be encouraged to be more imaginative in how they remunerate their staff. They must realise that students are paying customers, who have a right to expect first-rate education services.

- **Expansion Must be Sensible.**

The rapid expansion of Higher Education has been carried through with little thought for standards. While Britain certainly needs a better trained workforce, that does not necessarily mean it needs more graduates. Mindless expansion simply swamps the university sector, where resources are already wildly stretched. Expansion should only take place at a rate sustainable by university departments and workplace demand for graduates.

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<sup>43</sup> Higher Education Quality Council, 18-7-1996.

# Chapter Six: Policy Proposal

## 1. Funding by Results not Numbers

The success or failure of a university education is determined by outcome, not input. Students have been turned into consumers of an expensive product, and universities should be judged on how well they serve their customers. Research gradings are already allocated on assessments of completed work, and the Government should extend a similar system to the undergraduate sector.

We can measure teaching quality only by one concrete method, and that is the degree result university students obtain. If we are to raise standards in universities, then there must be a link between the quality of teaching a university provides, and the amount of funding it attracts. The current method of funding does not even attempt to make that link. A Conservative reform of Higher Education should therefore make funding reflect results. While setting universities free through progressive endowment will –in the long term- lead naturally to this result, change should be implemented immediately in those universities which may have to wait some time for endowments. As an interim measure, funding by result would certainly be preferable to the present situation.

Until universities are set entirely free of the state through endowments, the best way to push up standards in Higher Education would be to make a formal link between the degree class obtained and the state funding granted. University funding should be allocated according to a specific formula, which directly links funding to degree results. A course which achieves an average result of a 2:1 should receive more per student than a course whose average is a 2:2. This way, we would provide the best possible incentive to raise standards in our universities: Those whose students did well would be rewarded, those whose students did badly would have a compelling reason to teach them better.

In order to avoid the instability caused by unaccountably bad year groups, funding should be calculated according to rolling averages. Support for Arts subjects should take into account the last three years' results, and Science subjects the last four. This way, a general trend of results would be discernible, and funding would not fluctuate wildly.

The fundamental objection to this reform is that final results do not tell the whole story of teaching quality. Universities with poor reputations generally find it difficult to attract the best students, and therefore are likely to achieve relatively low results. Such low results need not be a reflection of poor teaching quality, but simply the result of less talented in-takes. In short, end results tell little about the "value added" to poor students by competent staff.

The same argument was deployed against school league tables in the 1990s; it held some truth then, and it holds some now. However, it is accepted today that while league tables do not give the whole picture, they certainly do provide a spur to those they measure.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Though Martin McGuinness may think otherwise, few mainstream politicians would agree with him.

At the bottom of the league there is the incentive to do better and move up; at the top, to keep up standards and retain pre-eminence. No league table can ever tell the whole story. It can however provide just the incentive needed to raise standards.

## **2. Funding by Department, Not University.**

The introduction of incentives and greater competitiveness into universities is not enough if we are radically to reinvent the Higher Education sector. The obvious result of matching funding to results is that some universities would see their incomes decline, while others would see them increase. The principal danger in this approach is the self-defeating outcome that in attempting to raise standards, we in fact destroy the very centres of academic excellence we are trying to replicate.

In order to avoid the situation where universities try to save money by across-the-board cuts, hitting both excellent and mediocre departments, funding should go directly to university departments, in direct relation to their specific results.

There are two compelling reasons for funding departments directly. First, it would sap academic and student morale if successful Departments were penalised because of failures elsewhere in their university, over which they had no control.

Second, it would encourage the growth of large, well-funded centres of excellence throughout the country. Universities with independent funding would concentrate automatically on specialising in their areas of strength, but funding by result and by department would equally have the same effect. Universities would be encouraged to specialise in the areas where they were strong, and had a track record of success, and to downsize weak departments. Over the medium term, it is entirely reasonable to presume that new centres of excellence in areas such as Engineering, Philosophy or Physics would spring up and be extended throughout Britain.

In many ways it is the attempt to excel in too many subjects that has harmed our academic standards in the worldwide market. With centres of real academic excellence in Britain, it is even possible that the brain-drain over the Atlantic would be reversed.

## **3. A Free Academic Marketplace**

Achieving higher university standards requires that the academic marketplace becomes less rigid, allowing a stronger link between academic remuneration and teaching quality. The practice of setting academic pay according to Civil Service style salary bands, is outdated and unwieldy, and simply embeds poor standards.

Liberalising the academic marketplace must set universities free to determine appropriate individual pay packages. By the state taking a step back out of employee relations, universities would automatically create a better link between quality of tutoring and level of pay. Linking pay to performance is normal in the private sector, but as the Government's difficulties over

introducing PRP into schools show, the introduction of private sector practice into public sector bodies is highly problematic when the state still meddles in internal affairs.

The artificiality of the present pay system must go. Minimum and maximum salaries must be abolished, as must what the CVCP calls the:

"myriad of pay structures which perpetuate both outdated classifications and demarcations of staff and provide structural obstacles to evaluation of work levels and of performance." <sup>45</sup>

Such structures frustrate the advancement of the talented, and render impossible the individual negotiation typical of a freely operating market. Competition for the best in the academic community will benefit not only talented teachers, but also universities and students in general.

The major problems being experienced by university departments in recruiting and retaining teaching staff are at least in part the result of this system. As the example of Norman Stone shows, Britain is losing some of its best academics overseas, principally because of the relatively low salaries our universities pay. Equally, the reluctance of young people to embark on academic careers cannot be separated from the low starting salaries on offer. These problems are aggravated by the Government's pursuit of its latest obsession: "access". Labour's policy of endlessly expanding universities within a basically static level of resources means that funding will always be inadequate, and that Governments will have recourse to the old ruse of offering substantial pay increases, but demanding they be funded by ever-greater productivity. The demand for unachievable productivity gains damages morale and deters new entrants into the academic marketplace. By setting universities free to decide pay levels by personal contracts and individual bargaining, the market would swiftly rectify the amount universities pay their staff

The abolition of artificial grades and scales would open up the academic marketplace to real competition, and would allow academic salaries to find their natural levels. It would introduce greater competition between universities, with institutions competing for the best staff, and attempting to lure them away with better salaries and working conditions. No competent academic has anything to fear from free and open competition for jobs: on the contrary, it may be their only hope of receiving a salary that will keep them in Britain.

The Bett Report's recommendation for a minimum academic wage was welcomed by certain sectors of the academic community, but should be rejected by Conservatives. A minimum wage that did not distort the market would be meaningless, while one at a substantial level would simply cost jobs.

The main problem in the university sector is not the recruitment of entry-level teaching staff, but the retainment of senior-level staff. A minimum wage would do nothing to reverse this problem. Given the increasing globalisation of the Higher Education market, it is also likely that these difficulties will extend soon to medium-level staff, as more of them opt for careers overseas.

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<sup>45</sup> CVCP *Investing in Universities and Colleges for Global Success*, Spending Review 2000.

The Government's reluctance to increase funding across the board might even reduce medium-range salaries, as universities searched for the money necessary to increase junior ones.

A Conservative approach towards making university teaching a more attractive prospect for young people should instead focus on ensuring that departmental promotion is based not on length of service or simple quantity of publications, but instead on teaching and research ability. Making universities free to set their own pay and conditions settlements and to concentrate on the results their students achieve, would make the academic workplace more responsive to talent than ever before. Financial independence and rigorous scrutiny of teaching quality would give universities the incentives necessary to attract the best teachers into British academia.

#### **4. A Reformed Examination System**

Any reform to the present university funding system will be counter-productive if it is not accompanied by reforms to the examination system. If funding were to be determined according to degree result alone, then universities would have an almost irresistible temptation to inflate results and thereby to inflate resources. If public endowments were to be granted without any clear indication of the teaching quality achieved by universities, then the public exchequer would probably allocate funding inappropriately. In the light of the problems already apparent due to degree and qualification inflation, either outcome would be disastrous for British Higher Education.

The interim funding model proposed requires a new method of making degree classifications entirely transparent. We must radically alter the examination system so that a 2:1 from the newest university equates directly to a 2:1 from the oldest.

The increase in popularity of modular courses shows that this would be needed even if the funding model were left as it is. As has been argued by others<sup>46</sup>, the growth of the modular system ultimately requires the entire transparency and transportability of academic achievements.

The way examination scripts are marked must be changed. The present system of external examination is essentially toothless, largely incapable of forcing departments either to toughen, or soften, the stringency of their marking. New methods of verifying examination marking should be introduced, similar to the standardization body for GCSE and A-Level results. University examination should be standardized to ensure complete transparency of achievement.

The essentials of any new system of external examination should concentrate on providing university examiners with a body capable of considering their marking decisions, and – where necessary - improving upon them. Universities should continue to make their own arrangements for the marking of examination scripts, but a proportion of those scripts should be examined by truly independent external examiners.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Radical Implications of Modularity*, Adrian Seville, 1997...

Such a system would mean external examiners initially considered only a small number of examination papers from each university department. They would have the power to do one of three things for each set of departmental papers:

1. Accept the verdicts of the university examiners as accurate, and verify their marks.
2. Accept the verdicts of the university examiners as correct to within a reasonably small bandwidth, and alter the marks marginally, probably by halving the difference between the university's and the external examiners' marks.
3. Reject the verdicts of the university examiners, and call in a substantial number of papers for thorough re-examination, with a view to awarding classifications without reference to the university.

Such measures would be a more powerful incentive to raise standards throughout the university sector than any other, and would emphasise the importance of universities attracting the very best teaching staff. If universities are serious about proving their value, and being truly world-class, then they should accept them.

## **5. A Single Quality Control Body**

Quality lies at the heart of any successful business competing in a global market. Britain's universities may not like to see themselves as multi-billion pound businesses, but that is what they are. Their future, that of their employees, and of their students, depend upon them enhancing the quality of their teaching. In a world where time and quality are more important than distance, universities cannot afford to allow themselves to fall behind their foreign competitors.

Britain has a bewildering array of Government bodies and quangos supposedly monitoring and defending quality in universities. Perhaps because of this number, quality has not been protected over the past 15 years. The current Government's attempt to set benchmark standards is evidence that this is now partially recognised –albeit partially. But in itself, it is not an adequate response. The failing of benchmark standards is that they may set minimum levels of quality, but they do not encourage optimum ones.

Instead of benchmarking, and the current quality control bodies, there ought to be just one organisation charged with the rigorous external examination explained above, and with monitoring standards of teaching. It ought to be entirely independent of the academic community, and make its investigations into university quality publicly accessible.

The example of the failing Institute of Learning and Teaching shows that to bolster confidence in the university system, quality control bodies must have real powers, and must be able to make an impact upon the institutions they scrutinise. By combining assessment of staff with assessment of the quality of degrees awarded within one regulatory body, such confidence could be established.

Conservatives should not advocate compulsory testing of all teaching staff, but they should ensure that potential students are able to evaluate the ability of their potential teachers. A new quality protection body should set examinations to judge the teaching ability of all academics, which should be voluntary but recommended. The Government should force all university departments to publicise figures – both through the media, and in their prospecti - showing exactly how many of their staff have successfully sat these examinations. While some of the worst staff may choose not to sit them for justifiable fear of failure, it would ensure that the best university departments had tangible proof to support their claims of teaching excellence. Such examinations would be no threat to the good teacher, and would be a powerful incentive for departments to recruit more talented staff.

# Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Young people deserve better. Britain's university system, whilst excellent in some respects, is critically flawed in others. The reform of the Higher Education system in 1992 has shown up the cleavage between the first rate standards of the best intuitions, and the mediocre expectations of the rest. It is students who bear the cost of a university system where excellence is seen to be patchy. The longer universities are allowed to erode standards of marking and teaching quality, the more degrees as a whole become devalued.

The rapid extension of Higher Education should have been accompanied by robust quality control measures, to ensure Britain retained a world class university system. It was not. Regrettably, Labour's plans to extend university to half of the 18-30 age group also fail to put in place any adequate measures, and will therefore accelerate the decline already apparent.

Academics from both old and new universities have consistently attempted to highlight the deleterious consequences of expansion without quality, but have been ignored. In the interests of Britain's university system as a whole, and of the young people it teaches, we should listen to what they have to say, and take action to remedy the very real problems they diagnose.

This paper outlines 5 critical reforms which would fundamentally change the nature of Higher Education. They would make Britain's university system more academically rigorous, more responsive to student need, and more careful with taxpayers' money. In the best tradition of Conservative reform, these changes would come about through the state interfering less, but interfering better.

At the heart of these proposals is a belief that university expansion needs to be slowed down. There is now compelling evidence that the limitless expansion of Higher Education for its own sake actually harms the career prospects of the people it is supposed to aid. Enticing ever-growing numbers of young people into universities simply raises the entry requirement into the job market, and ultimately serves no-one.

A moratorium on university growth would be a welcome development from virtually every perspective. This should not however be imposed by Government. Instead, the measures proposed here would make both universities and prospective undergraduates think seriously about the real value gained from Higher Education. Labour has imposed tuition fees, and seems likely to allow top-flight universities to charge their own levies in the near future. A responsible Party would urge young people to take a hard-headed look at the return they will get on an investment of 3 or 4 years of their lives, along with thousands of pounds of student debt. As in so many other areas, Labour is acting irresponsibly here: Conservatives should not do likewise.

Education used to be a trump card for the Tory Party. We supported the consumer, and fought against vested interests from whatever source. It is time that we went back to those instincts. After four years of Labour smoke and mirrors, the public are eager for a complete programme of real radicalism, sincerely meant. These university reforms would not leave them disappointed.