

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

POLICY CHALLENGE

The Dearing Report on Higher Education

A Personal Response

ANTHONY O'HEAR





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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

- The Dearing Report on Higher Education proposes that British undergraduates should make a significant contribution to the costs of their study for the first time in living memory. Yet, at the same time, the Report's recommendations will restrict diversity and choice.
- Should these recommendations be implemented, they will lead to the destruction of the university as an autonomous institution, a place of learning and research, geared to an undergraduate elite, to genuine scholarship and to education rather than training. The Report proposes that the important distinction between education and training be blurred at *all* levels, and insists on elements of training skills in *all* undergraduate courses.
- The Report sounds the death-knell of the integrated three year honours degree in this country, a system which has served our academic elite so well over a century or more.
- The Report proposes an unprecedented level of centralisation. Central government and its bureaucracy will interfere with university courses, qualifications, organisation and the training of teaching staff to an unprecedented degree. Universities are already nationalised – and unlike secondary education, there is no substantial independent sector which is able to maintain traditional values in education.
- The Report attempts to respond to the problems brought about by the recent massive expansion in student numbers: over the last ten years the proportion of young people going into higher education has risen from around 15% to one third. But the Report recommends a further expansion of student numbers with a target set – without any justification – of 45%. This further expansion will only compound existing problems.
- The expansion in numbers has led to a reduction in the average quality of students admitted to university. As a result, the Report recommends that courses in *all* universities should be 'broadened' and 'adapted' (or simplified) partly so that the less

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able will not be discomfited by failure but also to introduce elements of training and 'key skills'.

- In its efforts to impose a homogenous method of measuring students' achievements, the Report proposes an over-complex and intellectually dubious 'national system of qualifications', replacing, in time, the three years honours degree.
- Central bureaucratic control will be implemented through a 'Quality Assurance Agency', while an 'Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' will introduce compulsory qualifications in teaching for all university teachers. Some of the most centralist and least beneficial aspects of state school education are thereby being imposed on the universities.
- **The Report is, in effect, recommending the 'comprehensivisation' of the university system in an attempt to maintain comparability of standards over 176 degree awarding institutions.**

Recommendations

- Universities must be free to maintain their own distinctive identity so that students can choose the university most suitable to their individual needs.
- The high academic standards of a number of traditional British universities must be fostered and maintained, while a variety of broader courses should continue to be developed and made available to those students who wish to, and are able to, study at university. Choice and diversity must be maintained.
- This will entail the development of an 'Ivy League' of universities which must not be subject to the same bureaucratic controls recommended in the Report. The remaining universities should be encouraged to offer students the wide variety of courses which students demand.
- Universities must be allowed to project a clarity of purpose and individuality so that students can choose the establishment which is most suitable for their capabilities.
- The continued existence of the traditional university will be put into question by the high level of state intervention and central control recommended in the Report. The diversity and autonomy of universities is threatened and the pursuit of academic excellence is undermined. **The Report's recommendations must therefore be dismissed and serious thought be given to establishing a private sector of genuinely academic universities.**

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEARING APPROACH

THIS PAMPHLET CONSIDERS THE REPORT of the National Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* ('the Report' or 'Dearing'). This Committee, under the Chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing, was set up by Mrs Shephard as Secretary of State for Education & Employment in 1996, jointly with her then shadow David Blunkett.

It is an interesting comment on the way that our education system is managed that someone with no academic standing should have been put in charge of national educational policy three times; for this is Sir Ron's third Chairmanship of a Committee on education policy (he has previously reported on the national curriculum and on A levels and vocational qualifications).

Sir Ron Dearing is an emollient figure, a centrist, a forger of consensus, at his happiest when he has discovered a 'consensus', particularly on which no one had hitherto noticed. He listens, he consults, people say things to him, representations are made, arguments are presented and weighed, and, after due consideration, conclusions are drawn. And he is remarkably successful at what he is brought in to do. Brought in by Mrs Shephard to 'do' higher education, the present Government regards the Report's recommendations as 'consensual' and with, the exception of his funding model, as not requiring further consultation.

But that does not mean that the Report's recommendations are right. I intend to show why they are wrong and how, if implemented, they will bring about an irreversible decline in the quality of university education in this country. The fact that many of his proposals are simply accelerating already existing trends does not make them any the less regrettable.

DEARING, FEES AND UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

THE REPORT'S PROPOSAL THAT STUDENTS (or their parents) should pay a proportion of their fees has caught the attention of the media and the public. The ground has been so well prepared that few were surprised and the objections far more muted than they had been when more than a decade earlier Sir Keith Joseph proposed something similar. Indeed, as pretty well every key player, apart from the National Union of Students, the Liberal Democrats and some backbench MPs, accepts the principle of student fees, all that remains to settle is the detail of its implementation.

It is hard to quarrel with the principle. Fees will concentrate the minds of students in desirable ways. They are also equitable, in that a university education is both expensive, and, even should the Report's proposals be fully implemented, will not be universally available; at the same time, having a degree is, over a life time, likely to be a considerable economic benefit (although one which will inevitably decline as participation approach 50%). Moreover, if the payment of fees is linked to a freely available loan only repayable once income reaches a certain level, there is no reason why student contributions should deter either the poor or those with poor economic prospects in the long term.

Let us, though, look at the one new aspect of the Report's proposals on student fees. In many discussions of students paying their own fees, a major advantage was held to be that the disciplines of the market would be introduced into university and higher education. Institutions and students would both benefit from the greater freedom (and responsibility) which went with the right to exercise financial choice. Indeed, one of the major criticisms made of the Robbins report of 1962 was that, as a result of it, universities traded a large amount of their autonomy for apparently open-ended government funding. This criticism may or may not have been fair. But it is certainly true that in the decades since Robbins universities have experienced ever increasing government interference. So if students are to pay their own fees, surely the pretext for government control should be significantly reduced?

Not, though, under Dearing. Under Dearing, universities and students get the worst of both worlds: reductions in governmental financial support combined with unprecedented increases in interference from central government bureaucracy. Sir Ron Dearing is not a free marketeer nor does he approve of regimes of benign neglect (in which a system is allowed to develop spontaneously through a combination of natural evolution towards its own goals; its disciplines being imposed by the free choices of those wanting what it has to offer). What he proposes in his report is a centralisation of university structures and courses unimaginable only five years ago. There are two justifications for this, one philosophical and the other in a broad sense pragmatic. I contend that the philosophy is flawed and the pragmatism is the result of acquiescing in earlier ill-judged policies.

DEARING'S CORPORATIST DISPOSITION

THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THE REPORT describes a 'new compact' between students, institutions, the state and business ('the world of work'). The argument is that because these four constituencies all impinge on one another, this must be reflected in the way institutions of higher education are set up and organised, in terms of both long-term goals and day-to-day arrangements. The state pays for higher education, business needs graduates, hence the state and business have a right to dictate to universities. This is corporatism.

There are numerous suppressed premises and non-sequiturs here. The supposition that it is good for a society to have universities does not imply that the state should fund them, though the Report does not consider any alternative arrangements (merely a summary rebuttal of any such at 18.22). Even if the state does fund a sector, it does not follow that its purposes are best served by bureaucratic interference. In the view of many, the arms-length arrangements which existed in the 1960s and 1970s worked reasonably well. That is to say, universities flourished and their students prospered, for reasons we will come to when we consider the expansion of the last 10 years. In any case, 'serving society' is vague and catch-all; there are many ways in which *society* may be served, not all of which are readily identifiable or assessable by the *state* (or its agencies). So there is nothing inherently contradictory about a state which supports a sector, such as the university sector, but which refrains from direct interference in its arrangements, as happened under the earlier dispensation and did at one time happen with the BBC and the Arts Council.¹

But the Report's authors do not believe in the traditional concept of the university.² In their 'compact', they want to see higher education taking 'a more active

¹ The fact that such a self-denying ordinance is unlikely today is a strong argument in favour of full-cost fees and genuine freedom from the state if one believes in university autonomy.

² It is indicative that the Report does not use the term 'universities', except when the context makes it unavoidable as when it discusses the entitlement to the term 'university'. Elsewhere it prefers the infinitely elastic term 'higher education'.

role' in relating research and scholarship to 'the wider needs of society' and also in preparing graduates in the way 'the world of work' (i.e. the CBI) dictates. Now it may be that a modern economy needs a lot of graduates and a lot of people doing courses all the time, though it is salutary to reflect that Germany has only 8.7% of its 18-21 year olds on university courses, compared to 28.9% in Greece. But the actual needs of the economy and the relationship which may obtain between economic success and genuine higher education are far harder to establish than is hinted at in the Report (in its paragraphs 1.10 to 1.17). Nevertheless, even if we accept that there is an economic imperative to produce more graduates, it does not follow that that imperative is best served by forcing courses to remodel themselves at the behest of those claiming to speak on behalf of employers.

It may well be true that many university graduates are poor at arithmetic, English and self-expression. But the correct response to this is to ask why these students are on university courses at all, not, as the Report does, to seek to re-model *all* courses to include elements of 'key skills' to repair those skills which have been neglected at school. Why should a fee-paying student be forced to study 'key skills' just because 'employers' say they want it? The same applies for 'work experience', which the Report insists upon for *all* undergraduates on *all* degree courses. Any idea that a university degree might be precious just because it is a time of withdrawal from the world is firmly scotched by Dearing and his compact.

An Alternative Vision of Academia

According to Michael Oakshott what is most significant and valuable about university education is the gift of the interval: three or four years in which the undergraduate can exercise a Keatsian 'negative capability', and persist in an atmosphere of learning while following some recognised branch of learning in a state of creative uncertainty, mystery and doubt. He or she is exposed for a time to a sense of infinite possibility, something which may remain precious and enlightening and inspiring through the years of responsibility which are likely to follow. Such a vision is at least as valid as anything we find in the Report, and in a truly diverse system it should be available for those few who want it and who are capable of responding to its demands.

But Dearing's employer-led fiat will eliminate such an opportunity. It insists (in 9.30) that those *with degrees of every sort* should, in their courses, become 'familiar with outside world'. This will be enforced by the system of examinations he is imposing. To add insult to injury, he now expects students to pay for their courses as well.

Even if we are interested in equipping students for life outside the university, it is by no means clear that the Dearing University is better than Oakshott's. In Oakshott's

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University, students will encounter the best that has been thought and known in some fundamental field of human thought and endeavour. Their critical and analytical faculties and their curiosity will be fully engaged; these are things that they will take with them into later life. They cannot but be influenced for the better by their encounters with the best minds in history. In comparison, on a vocational course, students are only likely to get techniques and procedures with a short currency and of little intrinsic interest.

The Impact on Academic Research

It is not only courses that the Dearing 'compact' is transforming. He also wants university research and scholarship more actively related to 'the wider needs of society'. What does this mean? What would Sir Isaac Newton have said had he been so instructed? Or F R Leavis? Ludwig Wittgenstein? Or Sir Ernst Gombrich or Sir Lewis Namier? Or Rutherford or Francis Crick? Or virtually anyone committed to their subject, its problems and its fascination? It is not that research and scholarship in pure academic disciplines do not have a benefit outside themselves. It is rather that what benefit it has is a by-product. If it is valuable, it is valuable primarily for its own sake (as, surely, basic understanding in science, mathematics, literature, philosophy and history is). The Report misses this crucial point entirely. It is worrying that in section 4.31 it advocates the abolition of traditional disciplinary boundaries in those subjects whose economic value is of 'limited currency'.

A free society depends on the presence of autonomous institutions, balancing and complementing each other. Of course we need the state, the 'world of work' and higher education (and much else besides). Each of these things needs the others. The Report is right about that. But it is wrong to make the assumption that this need is fulfilled by infusing universities with values drawn from outside their own ambit, specifically with values drawn from the 'world of work' and from state bureaucracies. The particular contribution that universities can make to national life will be lost in a corporatist mish-mash in which everything merges into everything else, and no institution is truly autonomous, truly doing what it uniquely can do.

CHAPTER FOUR

'COMPREHENSIVISATION'

THE REPORT PROPOSES A FURTHER EXPANSION of higher education while at the same time 'dumbing down' the existing provision within a corporatist framework – in other words, the comprehensivisation of the whole system, a move analogous to the replacement of the 1960s and 1970s of grammar schools with comprehensive schools. But, in this case, there is no substantial independent sector to provide a model of a different, more academic, more elitist approach.

Is expansion necessary?

Ten years ago, 16% of the 18-21 age group in this country were undertaking higher education, either in universities or polytechnics. The figure had hovered around or slightly below the 15% mark since 1970. The 1990s, though, saw two major changes. In 1992 the former polytechnics were designated universities. At the same time, a major expansion in student numbers took place without, as Vice-Chancellors will tell you, any major expansion of funding. Indeed, funding per student has gone down by 40% per student over the last 20 years. By 1995, participation had reached 33%, at which time the Conservative government called a halt. The Report accepts the received wisdom among Vice-Chancellors and other self-interested parties: more funding, and more expansion, with a figure of 45% plucked out of the air. Why not 50%? Why not 60%? Why not 100%? There is no serious analysis which considers whether 45% of young people today are able or keen to undertake higher education.

It is doubtful that 33% of the age group is suited to higher education. This seems to be recognised in those countries in Western Europe which are closest to Britain in terms of culture and living conditions. By the mid-1980s, before the subsequent expansion in student numbers, Britain had the highest number of graduates as a proportion of the age cohort of young people of any country in Western Europe. A chart in the Report (3.23) shows that in 1994 our ratio of graduates with first degrees to the population as a whole (27%) is way above the European norm, where figures of less than 15% remain characteristic in Germany, France and Italy. Britain has a worldwide reputation for academic excellence; it is a system which has produced leaders, not just managers.

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The high American figure of 32% is often cited to our disadvantage, but this is for American first degrees: serious study there tends to start at Master's level, though it is important to remember that in the USA the university system is highly differentiated (even at graduate level). More striking still is that in 1989 the workforce in Britain has the same proportion of degrees as Germany, and rather more than France and the Netherlands. Where we did have a deficit, compared with Germany was in lower level craft skills. 56% of German employees had them and 38% of Dutch and 33% of French as opposed to 18% here. From an economic point of view, it is expansion in this area that was needed in the 1990s, not at degree level.

Quantity, not Quality

The suggestion that in 1997 we might already be admitting far too many people on to degree courses is confirmed by the quality of the students who are now going to university.

In the first place there is worrying decline in the numbers of students doing A levels in Maths and Physics. In 1989, 46,000 students took A level physics. In 1997, the figure was 33,508. For Maths the figures were 84,774 and 69,142 respectively. The effect of this decline is that universities are finding it increasingly hard to fill their places in Maths, the hard Sciences and Engineering. In the 'post-1992 universities' (i.e. the former polytechnics) the average entry grade for physics and engineering courses is 10 A level points, and for maths and chemistry it is 9. In other words, there will be many people on those courses with A level grades of 2 E's and a D.

However, it is not just that it is possible to get on maths and science courses with rock-bottom A levels. There has also been considerable criticism of Maths A level, in particular from the august London Mathematical Society. Two years ago it published an analysis (*Tackling the Mathematics Problem*) which was highly critical of the lack of essential technical facility of entrants to university maths courses; of their analytical powers; and of their understanding of the nature of proof and of the need for precision in mathematics. 50 universities have, over the last few years, moved to four year maths courses, as opposed to three, to compensate. Meanwhile a report produced in 1996 jointly by SCAA and OFSTED found significant reductions in the content of Chemistry A levels between 1975 and 1995, particularly on the detail of chemical reactions and on the knowledge of fundamental inorganic and organic chemistry. The same report also commented unfavourably on the reduction of algebraic content in A level mathematics, along with the huge increase in reliance on formula sheets in the exam.

Weaknesses in the subject knowledge of university entrants is not, of course, confined to those reading the sciences. A survey by the Queen's English Society in 1992 showed that university teachers from 148 departments across all disciplines reported

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that 20-30% of their students were 'poor' in particular aspects of English. Half of the departments would have liked to teach all undergraduates written English and a quarter spoken English as well. Very many respondents felt that the teaching of basic English in schools had either not been done or done very inadequately. Meanwhile, when writing his report on 16-19 examinations, Sir Ron Dearing himself received comments from university teachers lamenting the over-dependence on the use of calculators and extraordinary weaknesses in algebraic understanding even from students with good A levels.

So why is it proposed to expand university education even further when what is desperately needed is an attack on standards in schools and at craft levels? Instead of proposing yet further expansion of higher education, what the Report should have recommended was the reduction of the university population, together with an expansion of lower-level vocational work.

What are students studying?

Not all students are now studying the traditional academic disciplines any more than the majority of 'A' level candidates are studying maths and science. To balance the decline in traditional academic subjects, the fastest growing 'A' levels are Media Studies and Sports Studies (up from 1996 to 1997 by 29.6% and 34.6% respectively). In universities there are any number of hitherto unheard of degrees: Accommodation Management, Acoustics, Advertising, Animal Care, Animation, Appropriate Technology, Audio-Visual Studies, Audiology, Broadcasting, Caribbean Studies, Caring Services, Childhood Studies, Chiropractic, Cinematics, Clothing Studies, Combined Studies, Communication Studies, Community Studies, Cosmetics, Contemporary Studies, Creative Therapies, Critical Theory, Dance, Deaf Studies, Education Management, Entertainment Crafts, Ethnic Studies, Exhibition Design, Fire Safety, Foundation Science, Golf Course Studies, Horse Studies, Hospitality Studies, Hotel and Catering, Human Services, International Tourism, Jazz, Journalism, Leisure Management, Leisure Services, Literary Studies, Media Studies, Nursery, Office Communication, Peace and War Studies, Performance/Movement Studies, Personnel, Physical Education, Popular Culture, Property Management, Public Relations, Quality Control, Radio or TV Studies, Real Time Studies, Recreational Management, Retailing, Special Needs, Sport, Television, Theatre Studies, Third World Studies, Tourism and Leisure, Trade Union Studies, Vehicle Restoration, Women's Studies and Youth Studies, to say nothing of countless courses in various aspects of management, social work and counselling.

Some of these courses might, in some sense, be worthwhile. But it is implausible to believe that any of them could constitute an academic discipline in any serious sense.

They lack the very features which make an academic discipline what it is: a self-standing study with its own tradition and canon, with cognitive breadth and depth, and with the high levels of analysis, synthesis and critical evaluation of intellectually demanding and significant material which make reading for a university degree the formative experience it should be. Grade inflation at A level and GCSE notwithstanding, it is simply not the case that 33% of young people are capable of the level required for university degrees in the traditional sense.

What does business really want?

Few in the 'real' world (Dearing's 'world of work') are persuaded of the benefits of the new universities and the new courses. Already there have been a number of studies confirming what most people would have suspected: that top employers in law, banking and accountancy recruit most from Oxford and Cambridge, and then from traditional universities like Bristol, Durham, King's and University College, London, Birmingham, Nottingham and the LSE. As these are the institutions which also dominate the research rankings and, to a lesser degree, the teaching assessments, it is clear that an Ivy League of universities is forming. Many of the post-1992 universities fared dismally in the research rankings, while buried beneath the impenetrable jargon of the University Funding Council's teaching quality assessments there have been scathing comments about the lack of intellectual content and low expectations in some of their courses.

Dearing, though, does not like the idea of an Ivy League, however real or desirable such a distinction should be in practice. He is so intent on maintaining the fiction of 176 institutions all offering qualifications of equivalent standing that fails to realise that he will impose a framework and a bureaucracy calculated to squeeze life out of any institution or department with its own individuality, ethos or spirit.

Where is the evidence that one third of our young people is really suited to university education? The evidence – from 'A' level results to the experience of university lecturers to the attitude of employers – is that too many students lack either the temperament or ability for academic life – or both. Stuffing so many young people into institutions called universities to do activities of the sort listed above is a cynical pretence on which Dearing and his committee should have blown the whistle, if only for the benefit of the vast majority of students themselves. If things go on as they are, they will be offered increasingly dull courses, taught by over-stretched lecturers in over-crowded and under-resourced institutions of higher education. At the end of their course, they will have a mountain of debt and a qualification they share with half their age group, a qualification which will thereby be little valued. At that point, they might ask themselves if they would not have been better to have left education at the age of 16 and embarked on a real career.

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ALL DEGREE COURSES ARE TO INCLUDE what Dearing calls the 'key skills' of communication, numeracy and information technology, as well as a tranche of work experience. This is partly because the need to do this sort of thing 'was a major theme of the evidence from employers' (3.53). However, Dearing leaves it unclear what exactly these skills are, and also how they might add to material which should have been done in the national curriculum before the age of 16. One suspects that the demand for 'key skills' is a reflection of the failure of secondary schools to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to their pupils. Does Dearing really think that a top level Greats scholar at Oxford or a mathematics wrangler at Cambridge would have anything but well-deserved contempt for the unfortunate assistant charged with teaching them communication and literacy skills?

Section 5.20 does speak of the existence of 'a distinguished tradition' in higher education of academic study of its own sake but fails to indicate how pure academic study can be protected and encouraged. However immediately after doing this, the Report closes off the possibility of such study for tomorrow's undergraduates:

'we believe that...programmes should develop other capabilities which they will need beyond higher education'.

Is this the same Dearing who laboured manfully in his 16-19 *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (section 3.20) to preserve a distinctive 'A' level route for 16-19 year olds and waxed eloquent there about the self-standing character of academic disciplines, their distinctive traditions and canons and the value of the pursuit of a subject for its own interest? In that report, reflecting the clear policy of the Conservative Government of the day, Dearing also attempted to distinguish academic from vocational pathways, and that 'A' levels (academic) should be clearly distinguished in terms of content and purpose from NVQs and GNVQs (vocational). There, in contrast to what is proposed for university students, he did not insist that programmes of study be altered in order to fit in vocational elements or 'key skills' (there 'core skills')

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where such things did not flow naturally from the study itself. (See 7.27 and 7.30 of the 16-19 report, and note that the 'AS' in key skills is not made a mandatory requirement for the award of 'A' levels.)

In making a distinctive shift of policy, Dearing has clearly consulted a different set of people between making his two reports. Now he claims that to regard the purpose of separate academic and vocational pathways is 'at variance with the facts' (10.21). In the higher education report all he says about 'the distinguished tradition' of academic study for its own sake is that it develops 'high intellectual skills' in students. But this is to miss the point entirely. I do not suppose anyone at university studies maths or physics or history or literature or philosophy for the purpose of acquiring high intellectual skills. They do so or ought to do so because they have passion for and a commitment to the questions and methods and content of the subject they are devoting themselves to. They believe that there are certain things worth studying for their own sake, because they enlighten us as to what we are, to what the world is, and to what we might be: physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, history, the social sciences, literature, the study of art, philosophy and theology. And they are right. These things are worth studying for their own sake, irrespective of any intellectual skills their study brings with them. But because they are the things the cleverest and most cultured people have, over the centuries, studied and worked on, their study is associated with intellectual abilities of a high order, and also with the most precious gift of all, the readiness to follow the truth wherever it might lead. In comparison vocational study is very much a secondary activity – in intellectual and cultural terms – because for its content it draws on and assumes the fundamental disciplines, and because its purpose is not to seek the truth wherever it might be, but rather – in Bacon's terms – only in so far as it promotes the improvement of man's estate, and usually very much as that is judged at one particular time.

The Report is concerned with the improvement of man's estate – and little else. It talks about the production of high intellectual skills (5.20), but says nothing about what study might promote it. It is almost as if the content of what is studied is a matter of indifference. The Report repeats again and again that research and scholarship must be related to wealth creation. Indeed the very expansion of higher education it urges is justified by appeal to economic necessity, and then by clichés about rapidly changing worlds.³

³ Has Dearing or anyone else a measure of the rate of change, which would actually allow him to substantiate the claim that our world is changing quicker than that of Rome in the first century, or Florence in the fifteenth or England in the seventeenth?

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Here I can make only two brief comments. First, that the Report sees higher education as having a duty to promote economic equality (5.42) and that it can no longer assume a common culture (5.46), (which, of course, is the starting point of all those in education who want to destroy our cultural inheritance). Thus, a substantive political agenda is assumed by the Report's authors, one which a truly disinterested pursuit of truth might well contest. Then, secondly, the Report makes the astonishing statement that in 'a learning society' 'much specific knowledge will quickly become obsolete' (9.18).

This may be true of specific computer skills. But does Dearing really think that Plato and Aeschylus are obsolete, that Aristotle should be forgotten, that Giotto and Titian have been superseded by Damien Hirst, that Sir Harrison Birtwhistle and Oasis have replaced Beethoven and Elgar, that in the days of the X-files, the Millennium Dome and the Internet we have no need to study Newton or Einstein, that Maya Angelou and Martin Amis have made Shakespeare irrelevant, that modern historical research (suitably anti-sexist and anti-racist) means that we can dispense with Gibbon and Macaulay?

But large numbers are and will be studying something. The Report is well aware of the problems involved in teaching the number currently involved in higher education, though less than straightforward about the true causes of the problems; these are a combination of ill-prepared and qualified students and second-rate courses. Instead of saying this and proposing appropriate remedies, the Report attempts to tweak the whole system in a vain attempt to resolve the contradictions of too many students for anything truly meriting the appellation higher education. His proposals will not turn the dross of what is, in effect, further education for the masses into the gold of university life. But, if pushed through, they are likely to tarnish the courses and institutions of high standing which do exist.

THE DILUTION OF STANDARDS

IN ORDER TO ACCOMMODATE THE LARGE NUMBERS of students already on courses and the even larger numbers it hopes for, the Report places great emphasis both on 'access' and on what to do with those students who fail to make the grade by existing standards. These emphases are being used in the Report to justify a radical – but unnecessary – transformation and centralisation of the structure and teaching of existing degrees. The result is a corporatist solution which would ultimately destroy the traditional university.

Broadening access will lead to 'dumbing down'

Universities have traditionally been open to anyone who fulfils their entrance requirements. Most, indeed, looked favourably upon candidates from non-standard backgrounds. A culture of equality of opportunity was pervasive throughout the system in the best possible sense: places were given to those who were the best, irrespective of race, colour or creed. However, university education was regarded as privileged in the following sense: you had to earn your place, and once on a course you had to fulfil its requirements. The fact, as the Report admits, that few under the old system failed or were thrown off their courses shows something about the success of the selection system, and also about the students' own attitudes and those of their teachers.

It was true, as Dearing observes, that the partly skilled and unskilled classes and certain ethnic groups have low participation rate in higher education, compared with the professional classes. It is also true that while in 1970 59% of students at Oxford University were from state-supported schools, by 1994 that figure has fallen to 33%, while over the same period independent schools provided 38% and 44% respectively. This is not evidence of a growing bias in favour of for public-school educated students. It is, surely, a direct consequence of the abolition of state grammar schools which has removed a ladder of opportunity to the best universities for the 93% of pupils educated in the state sector.

There is, though, a more fundamental issue. Why should it be such a surprise that the middle classes are more highly represented in higher education than other classes? After all, despite all the talk of life-long learning, there is something highly unnatural

about spending one's days pouring over books, thinking and writing. Not every otherwise sensible human being is keen on any of this, nor need they be. The middle classes are predominantly those whose tastes, habits and abilities tend in the direction of study.

At 7.22 the Report proposes that each institution of higher education should have 'a clear policy about its strategic aims for participation with particular reference to those groups who are known to be under-represented; and that it should monitor admissions and participation against those aims'. The implications of this statement are astounding. For this amounts to a system of reverse discrimination, whereby university departments will be bullied and castigated unless – quite inequitably – they skew their admissions arrangements to satisfy an entirely spurious project of social engineering, one which has nothing to do with the merits of the students or the good of the subject.

Dearing admits that this will lead to a higher proportion of unprepared students entering higher education but he also encourages them to think that they are there as a matter of right. At 5.57 we are told that as students with 'more modest prior academic attainments or abilities' are admitted to higher education, 'adaptations to programmes and qualifications' will be needed: 'if such changes are not made, too many people will be set up to fail in higher education'. *In other words, higher education has to be diluted to cope with the influx of less able, less well-qualified students.*

The dilution of the degree

Dearing appears to be hostile to the very idea of a degree, as traditionally conceived. He is against it in terms of content, and in sections 9.10-9.13 he inveighs against the specialisation and elitism of the traditional honours degree. He also criticises its methods and its way of leaving students free of crucial assessments until the end of the course. He prefers Progress Files, Records of Achievement, and the profiling of students' capabilities throughout their courses, all according to a common format.

The effect of all this, whether intentional or not, will be to compromise the integrity of the honours degree, historically a priceless opportunity for deepening and broadening understanding of the deepest concerns men have had, unimpeded by everyday pettiness and the constraints of short term assessments.

The Dilution of Courses: modularisation

The Report recommends that every programme of study should identify potential stopping-off points during the three or four year course, so that those students who are unable to complete the full course can still be awarded a certificate. This is to reward the intellectually feeble and those who learn 'in different ways'. It will also mean that everyone will be doing exams and submitting to continuous assessment throughout

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their courses. This will typically involve 12 major assessments a year over three years, all intruding on the organic deepening and broadening to be expected in a three year course. The time and effort spent in complying with these assessments would surely be better spent on learning and thinking than on preparing for six bite-sized terminal exams or essays every six months of the course.

What this means in practice is that modularisation⁴ will be introduced into all courses. The traditional degree structure (whereby students would be examined in depth at the end of their course) allows for maturation, for the type of deepening and broadening and for the pacing over the long term that modularisation forbids. It allows students (and teachers) the creative leisure to follow all kinds of by-ways not immediately or obviously relevant to their courses – which is precisely where true learning often takes place. Lastly, finals exams represent a far stiffer intellectual challenge *and opportunity* than more graduated forms of assessment (in which students tend to cluster around the 2.1/2.2 borderline simply by virtue of having reproduced the stuff their teachers and textbooks feed them).

According to the Report, though, 'staff have come to value an approach involving less reliance upon a terminal examination'; 'many academics' apparently value assessing students 'over time and in a variety of ways' (9.40). But of the many academics I know (certainly several hundred), few would agree with this statement. Nor does the Report consider any of the many objections to continuous assessment (including the scope it offers for cheating, copying and diminishing academic adventurousness). The same applies to modularisation, the cornerstone of The Report's 'stopping-off' system. I challenge Sir Ron to produce one academic teaching honourably on a three year degree who is actually in favour of modularisation and who does not find it clumsily bureaucratic, as well as destructive of true educational values in the way it encourages fragmentation and a tracking down to the lowest common denominator of student choice, which is, by definition uneducated choice.

The Report is, tragically, the instrument sounding the death-knell of the integrated three year honours degree in this country, a system which has served our academic elite so well over a century or more.

⁴ i.e. a degree consisting of 36 self-contained modules taken over 3 years often with large tranches of continuous assessment (essays and coursework), as opposed to examinations at the end of the courses.

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National Qualifications Framework

In place of the traditional degree, the Report is offering an untried and largely inchoate 'national qualifications framework' (10.42ff). What is baffling is that Sir Ron Dearing well knows the difficulties and pitfalls associated with the 10 (now 8) level scale in school education and the intellectual impossibility of verbally specifying distinct levels of attainment in various subjects; but this is not stopping him attempting to impose something similar on universities.

What he is proposing is that progress through higher education should be divided into 8 levels, H1 to H8. Each level marks some stage in higher education, from first year certificate (H1) to doctorate (H8), an honours degree resting at level H4. Work prior to research (H4 and below) is to be measured in terms of 120 credit points per level, thus effectively imposing on all courses the modular system which has proved to be so unpopular in so many universities. These H levels are also calibrated with NVQ levels, a doctorate apparently being equivalent to NVQ level 5.

The significance of each of the H levels is to be determined by the academic community itself by the year 2000 (Recommendation 25). The Report admits that it will be difficult to define 'precisely what constitutes sufficient depth' for the honour degree title to be defined to be justified (10.47), or, presumably for any of the other levels.

Those unfamiliar with the workings of the national curriculum levels may not be aware of the ironic amusement caused when academic historians were given the official description of various levels and were unable to put them in the correct sequence. Indeed, the Report tells us that what is distinctive of higher education as a whole is that students develop their understanding of their subject and the ability to apply knowledge in a range of situations. But isn't that exactly what would be required of 'A' levels students? Or even of GCSE students? Or even of Key Stage 2 pupils in primary schools? What is the possible point or advantage of such empty descriptions? Are more precisely ones possible? Experience with National Curriculum levels would suggest that they are not. I well remember when the national curriculum levels were being defined people saying that level 8 (or was it 10?) in many subjects described the sort of thing one would expect in a doctoral candidate or even a don. Or *vice versa*. Nor does the Report even attempt to explain whether the intellectual and cognitive efforts involved in a level H6, say, in pure physics or maths at Cambridge is in any way equivalent to someone who did Masters degree in Tourism or Women's Studies in one of the post-1992 universities, or how indeed one would set about making any such judgment.

An appearance of standardisation will be achieved, a considerable bureaucracy will be set up and much time will be spent. But in Potemkin-village style, it will have no bearing on the quality or otherwise of what actually goes on in either teaching or

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learning – except in so far as it interferes with the work of academics who would prefer to be teaching or researching rather than demonstrating how their course fulfils the requirements of a level 3, say, on the Dearing scale, as opposed to a level 2 or a level 4.

'Quality Assurance': more corrosive bureaucracy

The Report does admit (10.7) that the expansion in higher education has put the existing quality assurance arrangement under strain. It states that the present external examinership arrangements 'cannot guarantee comparability of standards across a diverse system of higher education'. But is it really possible to achieve 'comparability of standards' when dealing with 176 very different institutions and 1.6 million or more students on any number and type of course?

Dearing thinks that over and above his 8 levels, more and more bureaucracy will be able to ensure comparability. This, to say the least, is most unlikely. We have already had a Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), in existence for 5 years and with an annual budget of over £10 million of public money. Although the proportion of firsts and 2.1s awarded has increased from 42% to 62% between 1973 and 1993, this organisation told Dearing that it had been unable to ascertain whether degree standards had fallen over time. The benefits which this organisation have achieved are unquantifiable; what is certain is that quality assurance bodies in higher education have traditionally espoused the latest pedagogical and managerial fashions and require a vast amount of paperwork from the department they visit. And they have, despite widespread public concern about the content of some courses and the way that they are taught, found only a very few courses to be unsatisfactory, not least one suspects because of their standard policy of judging a course *against the course's own* stated aims and objectives. Of course, many of the worries one has about courses in higher education stem just from those very aims and objectives – which quality assurance leaves blissfully untouched.⁵

It is improbable that the Report's proposed Quality Assurance Agency would be any less bureaucratic or any more effective than the Higher Education Quality Council or the Funding Council's assessments of teaching quality. Like these bodies, the QAA will generate a mass of paperwork and administration only dubiously related to its stated aims. But being a new body, it will have its own way of working, thus providing

⁵ It is indicative that when Honiton College offered a course in Spice Girl Studies, it had to be abandoned not because of any complaint by a Quality Assurance organisation but because only one student enrolled on the course. We can have little confidence that Quality Assurance in higher education will do any better.

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further distortion and disruption from the top to a system only just used to the HEQC and the funding councils.

Nor is it much to be hoped for from Dearing's reinforced external examiner system. There may be something to be said for lists of approved examiners, as he proposes, but the surrounding context is rather less welcome. Designated examiners will be expected to spend up to 60 days a year examining. They will be trained, they will have meetings with other examiners and they will be directed by the Quality Assurance Agency. In other words where once external examiners were experienced and distinguished in their academic fields, whose input into examiners' meetings was often both wise and incisive precisely because it rested on a wealth of tacit knowledge, the Report is investing in a new type of academic bureaucrat, a cadre of semi-professional examiners, cloned according to a QAA blueprint and bringing with him or her who knows what ideological and pedagogical baggage.

The Institute for Teaching and Learning

The same corporatist approach can be found in the Report's proposal for an Institute for Learning and Teaching. There was a time when the titles Master (Magister) and Doctor had either implicitly or explicitly a reference to teaching. Someone who was a master or a doctor was far enough advanced in his or her subject to be able to pass on its lore and mysteries to others. In those days the main qualification for teaching, particularly at university level, was a deep love for and knowledge of one's subject. The main qualification for learning at a university was an education adequate as a preparation for higher study and a real desire to learn.

Indeed, dons who *merely* lecture and *merely* expect their undergraduates to read books and to write essays, have their knuckles firmly rapped. The Report recommends that *with immediate effect*, all institutions of higher education give high priority to developing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students' learning (Recommendation 8) – as if lecturing and suggesting reading and marking and discussing essays is not to focus on students' learning. Similarly at 8.18, university teachers are enjoined to consider how students can become 'active participants' in the learning process: as if writing a tutorial essay or solving a mathematical problem is somehow less active than taking part in a group discussion or surfing the Internet. The former activities are certainly no less active than the former. In addition, they tax the intellect rather more, particularly for those unaccustomed to hard and solitary intellectual work in the fundamental disciplines or largely incapable of it.

It is, of course, for those who previously would never have gone to university that the Report is attempting to square the circle of mediocre ability and high standards.

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Dearing realises that real academics pay little *explicit* attention to teaching. They do not need to because their passion and their knowledge will communicate itself to their students, however disorganised or uninspired their teaching might seem to superficial observers, provided that their students want to learn from them and are capable of doing so. Some, at least, of their students may, in later years, recall that it was a privilege to be taught in however unworldly a way by a true scholar. But this is not acceptable for Dearing. Those teachers who find change hard to accept and do not reflect much on their teaching (perhaps because they are busy advancing their subjects) will be sent off to 'staff development' (8.14). New teachers in higher education are going to have to get associate membership of the Report's 'Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education'.

Like much else in the Report, this does not yet exist. Of all its proposals this is perhaps the most insensitive, the most philistine and the one most likely to be welcomed by Vice-Chancellors, university registrars, and those academics who do not regard their subject as their main vocation. For this new organisation will, in effect, become the monopoly supplier of university teachers. No one without its amalgam of dubious pedagogical principles (down with knowledge, up with technique), dim management theory (at best vacuous, at worst manipulative) and the latest in 'Communications and Information Technology' (now to be known as C&IT) will henceforth be allowed to teach in a British university or institution of higher education. And once in, he or she will be expected to follow it 'nationally recognised system of professional qualifications' from associated membership up to Fellowship.⁶

It will no longer matter how learned and distinguished one is. 'Staff' are now *required* to widen their roles to embrace 'the growth in lifelong learning, new partnerships with employers, and closer links with the economic life of localities and regions' (14.20); they are to be encouraged to 'enhance and up-date their skills'; they are to be stimulated to innovate in learning and teaching, all under the umbrella of the ILTHE. No matter that the monopoly supply of school teachers in the hands of the 92 university departments of education, has not exactly been a successful precedent, as all Secretaries of State for Education are brought, sooner or later, to admit. The Report now proposes to put university teaching under a *single* body.

The Report justifies the establishment of the Institute in part by claiming that 'higher education needs to have higher status and be regarded as a profession of standing'. To this one could make the reply that it is precisely when B.Eds and PGCEs became compulsory for schoolteachers that schoolteaching ceased to be a profession of

⁶ Presumably a Fellow of the Institute for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education will be entitled to use the acronym FILTHE.

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standing. Could it have been something to do with the anti-educational attitudes promulgated on those courses? Has Dearing any guarantee that this Institute will not do for Higher Education what colleges and departments of education have done for schoolteaching (despite which at 12.24 of his report Dearing reasserts their monopolistic position in the training of new teachers and extends it to in-service training of existing teachers)?

But these questions are, in a way beside the point. University teaching, when it was largely about educating an intellectual elite, was a high status profession, if not a particularly well-paid one. What honour and glory it had, it had without benefit of pedagogical diktats from Institutes of Teaching and Learning or interference from Quality Assurance Agencies. Its reputation depended entirely on the learning and research and scholarship of its teachers, and their dedication to their subjects. Of course some university teachers were confident, even slick in their lectures. Some were charlatans. Others were weighed down by their learning and the difficulties of their subject. Some were hesitant in delivery. They thought, they paused, they went off on tangents, they ran over time, their lectures and tutorials had beginnings, but no ends. They were not necessarily the worst teachers. Sometimes they were the best in that they communicated the complexity, difficulty and fascination of their material. How, to take examples from my own subject, would, say, Wittgenstein or G E Moore or J L Austin or John Wisdom or Karl Popper or even Freddie Ayer have fared under scrutiny from Sir Ron's Institute, or his Quality Assurance Agency?

To ask such questions shows how far Dearing is from true university education, and how far he has allowed the political imperative of employer-led mass higher education corrupt the ideal. Brian Sewell has described his unforgettable days as a student when he learnt about the riches of European art, culture and thought from the likes of Wilde, Blunt, Kitson, Gombrich, Ettliger, Wittkower and Kurz, a 'pantheon of scholars who would be forever excluded from teaching by those who run Sir Ronald's little institute', he went on:

Have we forgotten the true nature of education? It is not to produce a generation of technocrats; it is not to save the time and money of industrial and commercial giants...it is not to provide the world with yet more zombies, umbilically attached to a computer; but as the new universities of the Nineties have always mistaken education for training, providing honours degrees in hotel management and domestic aquarium design. Dearing's report consolidates this view. Education will soon no longer be a cultural pursuit broadening the mind, but a narrow matter of technology policed by a sinister institute charged with the duty to make the

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teaching staff conform. The doors of perception must be closed and locked, and all subversives who would open them, expelled.⁷

To which the reaction of civil servants, government ministers and university administrators will be an embarrassed shrug: 'surely you can see all this is hyperbole...Treasury constraints.. vital need for mass entry...the humanities are being preserved...'

But it is not all hyperbole. Sewell is nearer the truth than Dearing. From what we have seen in school education, we know what happens once institutes of education start legislating about 'good practice', with their undistinguished professoriates, their jejune political correctitudes, their endless verbiage about student-centred learning and pupil self-esteem, their hostility to traditional culture, to genuine excellence and to traditional methods, their messianism about computers or whatever is the latest technological fad, and above all their insufferable complacency and intolerance of any real diversity.

POSTSCRIPT

DEARING WILL BE REMEMBERED for introducing student fees. He will very likely be castigated for that. That would be unfair, for reasons already outlined. What he should be remembered as is as the man who, in order to endorse the impossible dream of mass higher education, hastened and codified the suppression of much of what was best in British universities.

What we need are some universities who say that they want nothing to do with modularisation, with mass entry of the unqualified or with pre-degree stopping-off points; who will employ dons uncertified by Sir Ron's institute and who will immediately dismiss anyone foolhardy enough to accept a fellowship from it; and who will refuse to be pestered by quality assurance agencies, maintaining that all the quality they need is evident in scholarship and research of their dons and the excellence of their graduates. We should allow an 'Ivy League' to emerge which will be free from all the constraints and corporatist controls recommended in the Dearing Report.

We need some universities who will not burden their undergraduates with key skills, work experience or records of achievement, who will let them study and read and learn about some recognised branch of learning for three or four years, at the end of which they will be examined for an honours degree. Above all we need some universities whose members understand the difference between education and training, whose courses and disciplines are the fundamental ones in the natural sciences, mathematics, history, philosophy, literature and the true humanities, and whose students are those who want to study these things uninterruptedly, and who are qualified to do so.

The real question raised by Sir Ron Dearing and his committee is whether such universities will be possible in the state sector in this country. Despite the introduction of student fees, of which it now seems that universities are not going to receive the full proceeds, this seems increasingly improbable. For those who care about the traditional university and its virtues, and for those who hope that in the future their children might be able to go to one, the time has come to think about independent universities free from the shackles and the dumbing down proposed by Dearing.

⁷ *Evening Standard*, 19 August 1997.

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