

An Adult Higher Education

A Vision of a Future

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The Hidden Revolution

In the last ten years British higher education has been transformed. Many changes have taken place, but probably the most fundamental in the long term has been the change from a system where students were primarily school-leavers, to one where the majority are mature – people in their mid- and late 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond. In 1988, for the first time, such learners formed a majority of entrants to Universities, and since 1990 their numbers have continued to grow, at a time when the expansion of young entrants was beginning to level off. At the same time, and linked to this, we have seen a dramatic rise in women's participation, in postgraduate and post-experience programmes, in professional education and updating work and part-time study.

These changes raise fundamental questions, of two kinds, for the whole higher education system. First, how far are adults as learners different from young people, and therefore in need of different kinds of learning experience or outcome? Second, and more importantly, if teaching in higher education is no longer primarily about preparing a small élite of bright, white, male school-leavers for key leadership roles in society, what is it for? These are questions which touch on the whole system: on what is taught and how it is taught, on how institutions are organized and how they relate to the world around them, and to our notion of higher education.

The NIACE Response

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is the national organization for adult learning and learners. Its traditional focus in higher education was on access: with ensuring those who had missed the chance of higher education at the "normal" age, because of

personal circumstances or discrimination of various kinds, could get in later on equal terms with "mainstream" entrants. However, the major changes already noted, and growing evidence of the difficulties faced by such learners within the system, led in 1993 to a shift of priority. The Institute observed that the issue of what "an adult higher education system" might be like was fundamental, but it was being overlooked by almost all the key policy bodies. As a result, in 1993, a small policy group drawn very widely from throughout the higher education system, produced a policy paper "An Adult Higher Education: A Vision", and is now carrying out an extensive consultation about its implications.

The failure to notice the changing age profile of students is not entirely surprising. Most commentators are accustomed to thinking of higher education as what happens to a minority of young people at the end of formal schooling; political debate focuses on youth participation, and is measured in terms of "age participation rates" – a meaningless concept when there is no such thing as a "normal" age to enter university. Mature learners are also "invisible" on campus because they do not conform to the stereotype of the "student". Their combination of study with work and domestic responsibilities makes them less visible on campus (their "spare time" is a job and domestic responsibilities), a growing number are studying primarily in the workplace, and many are enrolled on postgraduate, post-experience and professional updating programmes.

Testing the Consensus – Seven Principles

The policy paper tried to identify the underlying principles behind the many confusing current initiatives, to present a vision of the future and invite debate. The group sought to establish how far there is consensus about the direction in which higher education should go, and about how to get there. They invited written responses, spoke about the paper at a range of events, and

mounted a number of conferences at which key players, national and institutional, were invited to respond. In the light of the very positive responses the group is now working on a successor paper, which will focus the recommendations more sharply, and try to set an agenda for action.

The core of the paper was the "vision" of an adult higher education. This is not a proposal about institutional structures or organization, but a set of seven principles, to guide policymaking, development work and innovation, and to help to shape policy. We were anxious to avoid appearing to be trying to dictate institutional structures, knowing how much control is properly devolved to, and jealously guarded by, individual institutions and their component parts.

What Is Higher Education?

The first principle is that the social and economic needs of the new world will call for a higher education defined not as a set of institutions but as a kind of learning. What would make it "higher" and, thus, distinct from other kinds of education; what would be the interlock between the creation of knowledge and its transmission? Unlike schooling, or traditional "training", higher education is where knowledge is made, as well as passed on. It might, however, be delivered in many places, including the workplace, the home, the community, and a variety of individuals and agencies might be part of this wider learning community.

Second, higher education would be primarily lifelong. While there will continue to be a place for young people, acquiring the foundations for a lifelong learning and working career, the majority of the learners will be mature, learning alongside, or in intervals between, periods of work. This will call for different approaches to teaching and learning, and especially for the creation of a national credit framework, to allow individuals to accumulate credit over a lifetime from different programmes and institutions.

The Learner at the Centre

"Learner centredness" is the third principle. Traditionally, higher education has been built, not around the needs of learners or employers, but around disciplines, and learners have submitted themselves to these – becoming physicists, historians or accountants. Disciplines will always be important, we continue to need chemists with a solid base in the discipline itself, and many people will, at some stage in their

lifelong learning careers, wish to pursue one discipline single-mindedly. However, in the world of multiple careers, of small and flexible learning organizations which the future offers us, each individual will need to build a unique personal learning portfolio throughout their lives. Increasingly, what matters will be what makes sense to the particular learner, as she or he changes and adapts to new circumstances, rather than a predetermined notion of what is a "proper" combination. This will, of course, call for great flexibility by institutions, and for sound and impartial guidance, to help individuals to chart their way through an increasingly complex maze of opportunities. Individuals will want their studies to be coherent and progressive, but they may need help in balancing their own priorities and the structures of the disciplines themselves.

Achievement and Failure

The fourth principle concerns achievement. Traditionally, British education treats "quality" as exceptional, with testing and selection systems designed, at each stage, to weed out a majority in order to identify the exceptional minority. In this world, the "quality" of a university degree is as closely related to the number of people who have not got one, as to what successful graduates can do. People thus treat a rise in the number of people qualifying as a fall in standards of assessment, rather than an improvement in achievement.

In recent years this model has been challenged by the new vocational qualification system, and by some reforms in the school curriculum, which try to measure quality in terms of what individuals can do, know or understand, rather than how much better they are than their peer group. A knowledge-based economy and a learning society mean maximizing the capability of everyone, not discouraging them by failure. They also mean recognizing as wide a range of kinds of achievement as possible – none of us can predict where the great contributions to the welfare of society and the economy will come from, and we should be encouraging diverse talents, not the reverse.

Driving the Knowledge-based Economy

The fifth issue is economic proactivity, making the university a driving force in the knowledge economy, not only through its research and consultancy, but through its students at all levels. In the past, much higher education gave its young

undergraduates knowledge and skills, but left it largely to employers to decide whether to use them or not. Since many of these skills were not explicitly defined, to either student or employer, many were wasted. The exceptions were in some kinds of research and some areas of post-experience work like management, where there is a strong tradition of close working links between the university and the problems of the workplace. A more adult higher education will find this less difficult: adult learners, many of whom are already in the workforce, are better placed to understand the potential applications of what they are learning. Higher education should be treating them more as it has traditionally treated professional and postgraduate students – engaged in a dynamic relationship between the university and the workplace, where students and staff are constantly bringing the experience and problems from the world outside into the university, and carrying its knowledge back again.

Explicitness

Our sixth principle, explicitness, is perhaps the greatest single key to unlocking the potential of the higher education system. Because what higher education teaches is complex and difficult to understand (for anyone other than those already qualified), it has traditionally been a closed system: a “black box”. While in schools or further education a variety of players (teachers, administrators and examining boards) are involved in the process, in universities students are recruited by the same academic staff, who then teach them, examine them and award them a degree. As a result, many students are unclear about exactly what they are committing themselves to when they begin, and what they can do when they emerge at the end. Employers, especially in the small firms which are the growth points of the new economy, (who are often not graduates themselves) have little information on which to make decisions about what they are “buying” in a graduate. Perhaps this did not matter when higher education was a small world, dealing with a small group of the population entering a limited range of kinds of employment. In the present context, it is bound to lead to many people making unwise decisions about what and where to study, and to the resulting skills being wasted. Nevertheless, the experience of NCVQ and of the small but growing number of universities exploring ways of making the outcomes of learning more explicit, suggests that the task is far from simple[1]. Although both employer and learner are interested in the

outcome of learning, defining that outcome can be very difficult.

A Thousand Flowers

The final principle is diversity. While the Government and others like simple hierarchies of value which place all institutions in order on a single dimension, the reality is infinitely more complex, and the annual “league table” which *The Times* publishes, placing Cambridge at the top and some hapless former polytechnic at the bottom, tells us more about British social prejudices than about achievements or outcomes. A given university may be superb in its work in one field and very weak in another and, even on a single course, different students can have very different experiences. As importantly, it is impossible to predict with any accuracy what kinds of knowledge and skills we will need in 20 years’ time. Most people’s working lives will outlast most employers and, as the CBI suggested in *Towards a Skills Revolution*[2], we stand a better chance of prosperity by encouraging a multiplicity of enthusiasms as by trying to plan for skills needs. This all implies more diversity, not less. We need to enable different learners to pursue a variety of interests, and different institutions and different departments to offer different things. Some fields and institutions will grow, and others will shrink, as demand and opportunity present themselves. What must be avoided, at all costs, is assuming that Cambridge is “better” than Derby, or that an institution which concentrates on white school-leavers from a select range of schools is “better” than one which concentrates on black women returners with few previous qualifications.

Frameworks

Although we did not wish to suggest particular institutional structures, we did propose that the higher education system as a whole could be thought of helpfully in terms of three interlocking “frameworks” – for learner support, curriculum and credit. All three are essential, and have been provided traditionally by single institutions, and a single group of staff carrying out all three roles. However, there is nothing inevitable about this, and in the future they might come to be provided in different places, and perhaps by different agencies.

The learner support framework is a set of systems to support each individual in managing his or her individual learning career: through guidance (about choices of programmes and

modes of study as well as about career implications), personal tutoring, mechanisms for recording achievement and definitions of entitlement. This is one of the traditional cores of British higher education which has been under threat as numbers expanded and resources did not. The second is a curriculum framework – not a “national curriculum” for higher education – but a range of programmes which enable individuals to develop a range of core capabilities, specialist knowledge and skills, in ways which encourage the skills of independent learning, reflection and critical thinking. Curriculum strategies will also give more emphasis to using the practical experience which adult learners bring with them to education. The third framework is a national framework for credit, underpinning all higher level qualifications (“vocational” and “academic”) and allowing individuals to accumulate and transfer credit for small units of learning between institutions and programmes over time. This has been the subject of growing debate, stimulated recently by the publication of the Higher Education Quality Council report on the subject[3].

Who Pays?

The NIACE policy group also considered resourcing. Although Britain is not a low spender on higher education by international standards, a high proportion of that expenditure is on living support for full-time students. The system is not generously funded for its teaching roles, but there is no likelihood of any government increasing expenditure significantly. This poses a dilemma, since we are clear that we would wish to expand the number of people participating, not reduce it. Furthermore, the present funding methods are inequitable (discriminating, for example, arbitrarily against part-time learners, and giving public subsidy to those who could pay, while excluding those who cannot); inefficient (for example by discouraging part-time learning even when it is much more cost-effective for the state and the economy) and wasteful (failing to develop the talents of many people who cannot afford to participate). Even for those whom it does help, the present system imposes hardship on many students who live below the official poverty line even when they use the student loan facility to the maximum.

The group therefore proposed a radical solution. First, expenditure (whether by the state, the individual or an employer) is an investment in human resource, comparable with any other

economic resource, and should not be regarded as a cost. Second, students should be responsible for their own living costs when studying, if necessary deferring those costs through a radically reformed learning loan scheme, perhaps of the kind now in operation in Australia, and proposed by researchers at the London School of Economics. Public funds, at whatever level, should be concentrated on the costs of learning, not living, and distributed equitably to all learners, without discrimination on grounds of age or mode of study, perhaps through some form of voucher or “credit” scheme, which would enable individuals to use their “purchasing power” more directly to exert influence on the higher education system. Although there is surprisingly wide agreement about this strategy, it is politically risky, since no politician wishes to be identified as the one who proposed the abolition of the student grant, however much all agree that it is inevitable. One of the major challenges for the next few years is to find a way of overcoming this problem, for without it the present system will become increasingly untenable, and quality will be seriously at risk.

The New Agenda

The NIACE proposals have received widespread support, in written responses from managers and others in institutions of higher and further education, and from the representatives of the major national agencies who have spoken at the Institute’s conferences. A wide range of issues have been highlighted. Perhaps the key ones now are:

- *Funding models* – work is needed to define more clearly how new approaches to funding might relate to the principles identified in the report. Although, at one level, there is strong consensus for change, the present system “works” (after a fashion), and radical change of the kind we propose might have unexpected side-effects which need exploring.
- *The core* – there are many models of “core skills” and “personal transferable skills”. The Government and NCVQ have adopted a particular version for lower level qualifications, but the core of higher education is probably different. We need to explore what is the essential core of higher education qualifications, and how the capabilities can be assessed reliably.
- *Guidance* – the worlds of work and education have both become more complex and

uncertain, and individuals increasingly need support in learning to make wise choices about learning and working careers. Many reports have recognized the importance of reliable and impartial support for learners in choosing learning routes and planning careers, but services are still very haphazard[4-8].

- *Quality* – the current quality assurance systems in higher education still pay too little attention to the perspectives of employers and learners, and rest too much on traditional notions of quality drawn from a small and élite system. Some quality assessments have discouraged the kind of innovation in teaching and learning approaches which learners and employers increasingly expect. Work is needed to define the qualities which quality auditors and assessors should be seeking.
- *Social exclusion* – a particular concern, especially in a European context, is who is included and who excluded by the changes which we advocate? There is a clear risk that the “learning society” will become a society divided into the knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor – what can higher education do about this?
- *“Adulthood”* – much of the literature on adult learning stems from a world where formal adult learning was a minority activity, and adults were on the margins of educational institutions. How much of it still holds up in the new context, how different are adult learners at the higher education level?

These are the issues which NIACE will be exploring, in partnership with a range of collaborators, over the next few years. The

Institute is always anxious to expand its networks, to embrace a wider range of interested individuals and agencies, and would very much welcome hearing from others interested in pursuing this agenda.

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