

## Is Tertiary a Solution?

Among those concerned with the education of adults there is a fairly widespread view that the current relationship between HE and FE is unhelpful to learners, making access and progression needlessly difficult.

One proposed solution to this problem is the creation of a “tertiary” structure under which the boundaries would be blurred, either by merging of institutions or by closer and more equal partnerships.

This solution may be desirable, but it is debateable whether it will achieve the objective of ensuring access to the full range of HE opportunities for adult learners.

The hierarchical structure of English HE has proved remarkably resilient over generations, for at least two distinct reasons. On one hand there is the traditional autonomy of Universities, under which they have privileged constitutional status, protecting them from unwarranted interference by the State or Government. This has always been argued on the basis that the highest institutions of knowledge creation exist to protect the right to investigate freely and publish what it finds without fear of political repercussions. This function remains important, and should only be challenged if Universities betray the principle of conscientiously seeking the truth and publishing in good faith.

The second reason for the resilience of HE is, however, more questionable. It lies in the interlocking between the hierarchical structures and values of HE and the power and class structures of English society. Despite occasional attempts to argue that all Universities are equal, and the notion that all degrees are of equivalent status, everyone within and outside the system is well aware of a status hierarchy, with Oxbridge and one or two other institutions at the top. Although other institutions may choose, for reasons of ideology or necessity, to carve out different missions, the informal and reward systems of English HE are all based on benchmarking against these elite institutions. Most potential students and most staff compete for places at the highest status institutions, and research performance is measured against closely related standards.

The mission of the elite institutions has always been built around highly selective student entry, and high quality academic research, and none has ever had the recruitment of adult or non-traditional learners at the heart of its mission. The recruitment of such students, and the kinds of curriculum associated with them has always been associated with lower status institutions. Curricular innovation carries a similar stigma.

In this market, only an institution with serious recruitment problems (itself a sign of low status) would have a rational basis to seek to expand its adult student numbers, since to do so downgrades its standing in the hierarchy of institutions, and with it the standing of its students and graduates. The market forces which drive this are brutal, clear and well understood by all concerned. They are also closely allied with the social class structure, with the elite institutions building and maintaining the social and economic elite, who reinforce it in turn sending their sons and daughters to the same institutions when they can. It is a brave, and perhaps irresponsible, middle class graduate parent who advises their offspring to study at a low status institution if a high one is offering a place.

When Government seeks to intervene to change this, it is likely to be rebuffed. Most recently, it has tried through the 2004 Higher Education Act to link work to widen

participation to institutional funding through the student fee regulations. Institutions have to satisfy the Office for Fair Access that they have appropriate strategies and systems for widening participation if they are to be allowed to charge top up fees. However, in the course of the Parliamentary process and the negotiations around it, most of the teeth of the Office were drawn, and while it is clear that plans will be prepared, and probably implemented, they will rarely be radical, or change the hierarchical position of non-traditional students, nor will the Office in practice refuse to allow an institution to charge top up fees. The result will be some widening of access to HE at the margins, high status institutions will trumpet relatively small scale successes, and low status ones will continue to absorb the large majority of low status students.

In this context, the tertiary idea stands little chance of success. For the University it means closer association with low status students, and with low status institutions, increasing the share of sub-degree students. In reality the model is only likely to seriously take hold with institutions whose status is already low, and for whom it represents a route to improved flow of students through links with sub-degree programmes. Over time, it is likely to lead to a binary system, rather like that operating before 1998, when the Polytechnics, which mostly specialised in non-traditional learners, teaching and applied research, were merged with the higher status Universities, with their highly selective recruitment and academic research focus.

For adult learners this outcome has some attractions. They would get more open and usable progression routes, appropriate curricula and teaching arrangements. But the resulting qualifications would be low status ones, and arguably the learners would be sold short.

The tertiary idea, therefore tends to lead to a system divided “vertically”, with two or more strands of institution providing nominally the same range of qualifications to two different clienteles. However, there is another way in which the system might be reconfigured, which would provide more equal access to all learners but still allow the deeply entrenched hierarchical system to maintain itself. This would involve a “horizontal” division, in which one set of institutions would provide a lower level of study and another would provide the higher one. Thus all entrants to HE would do so in institutions which provided a qualification roughly equivalent to the first two years of an Honours degree (like the current Associate Degree), which prepared them either for progression into employment or to the “higher” institution where they would take another year or two to reach Bachelor’s or Master’s level. In this configuration the high status institutions would be reshaped, with a renewed link between teaching and research, with a more selective entry. The current low status institutions would benefit from a more diverse entry cohort, since all those entering HE would pass through them, and they would have the opportunity to concentrate more effectively on the quality and appropriateness of their teaching. For learners, access to the first phase of HE could be widened substantially, and programmes would set out more systematically develop both understanding of an academic discipline, and of what disciplined study at higher levels means, and the development of a range of personal and employability skills. For both learners and the State the costs of participating in this first phase would be significantly reduced.

Is this solution any more feasible than the former? It would appeal to those in the current elite institutions, who have proved such a powerful block to change for so long. Those institutions would maintain their academic standing, nationally and internationally, and they would be able to recruit more equitably without such risk to

their academic standards, since all applicants would have had two years' experience of HE, an understanding of what higher level study involves, and motivation to study the subject. The lower status institutions would gain a broader intake and the opportunity to focus on the quality of teaching, and preparing students for employment in a new kind of "graduate" labour market. They would be able to take greater risks in recruitment and in curriculum design. For the State such a system could produce greater and wider participation in HE without a proportionate increase in cost (something envisaged in the original design of Associate Degrees).

The major stumbling block to such a venture is the three year Honours degree. Like A levels this is one of the perceived benchmarks of the education system, fundamentally associated in the public mind with quality and status. Resistance to Associate Degrees has demonstrated that perceptions of market demand for a two year qualification are positive only when the programme is intimately linked with particular employment outcomes. Elite institutions would also probably resist a move to prevent them recruiting the most able at the first opportunity.

These would be difficult obstacles to overcome, but the prize for adult learners is serious. I would argue that such a solution stands a better chance of going with the grain of the current system (whatever one's view of it) than the tertiary option, and if it were to come about would be at least as good, and perhaps better, for adult learners.