

The english system of education and skills



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UK Higher Education (HE) Policy A Brief Introduction to The Dearing Report (Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education) •

Published in 1997, 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' is a series of major reports delving on the future of HE in the UK.

- Its preparation was led by Sir Ronald Dearing, Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, who later became Lord Dearing, the first Chairman of The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (November 2002 to January 2005).

- It made 93 recommendations of which 49 were addressed to the government, and the rest to funding bodies, research councils and employers. The main areas of concern:

1. University funding

2. Wider access to HE

3. University expansion

4. Maintenance of academic standards (teaching and qualifications)

- Key recommendations:

1. Funding - Introduction of university tuition fees (in response to planned reductions in HE funding)

2. Expansion - Expansion of HE by removing caps on certain courses and widening the range of degree and sub-degree level courses (to fulfil demand from employers)

3. Training - Opportunity for staff training during their probationary period (under a system in which credit earned at one institution was transferable to another)

4. Qualifications - Broadening the framework of qualifications, and transferable credits.

More recently, since 2006 he also published a report to review languages

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policy to address the lack of modern foreign language skills amongst university students.

The main criticisms of the Governments HE Policy

- Introduction of university tuition fees

The main criticism of the report was its most significant recommendation for university funding – the change from the previous total grant funding by the government to the present partial grant funding supplemented by tuition fees in the form of low interest student loans.

“ We therefore recommend that students enter into an obligation to make contributions to the cost of their education once they are in work... The Inquiry favours a combination of student tuition fees (on a loan basis) and the continuation of means-tested maintenance grants and student loans as the best way to seek contributions from higher income families and graduates in work... to make a flat rate contribution of around 25 per cent of the average cost of higher education tuition, through an income-based mechanism.” (Dearing)

As chairman of the HEPI, he later allowed universities to charge even higher tuition fees for certain courses because “ We are moving into a new world for institutions of price competition” (Dearing)

The removal of up-front fees and the limited return of grants are insufficient to offset the experience of student debt, especially by low-income families. Many poor families are positively deterred from entering HE due to the fees and concern of getting into debt.

- Not enough is done to address the lack of skills amongst HE students and adults as compared to most other comparable members of the OECD.

“ We have neither the quantity nor the quality of necessary vocational

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skills... Our skills base compares poorly and, critically, all of our comparators are improving. Being world class is a moving target.” (Leitch)

Some Personal Recommendations for the UK HE system

Many of the initiatives other than those dealing with funding are positive for the UK higher education system. The thorny issue remains funding. The Leitch review published in 2006 also makes some suitable recommendations for the present-day UK HE system. These were made in response to the government’s concern in 2004 to engender greater skills in adults due to demographic changes in the workplace.

A successful HE policy judged by its

wider acceptance by students, their parents, and the society as a whole effectiveness in promoting national education and skills, and

responding to the economic needs of the country,

should have the following characteristics (with respect to funding):

1. Students from poorer backgrounds would not be at a disadvantage, otherwise they may not be have the means to acquire HE at all, or they may feel obliged to opt for cheaper degree courses instead of selecting on the basis of academic considerations. High student fees are the single biggest obstacles to continuing their studies into higher education.
2. Enabling contributions by students should only be directed at students who are able to afford to pay for their own studies. Even then, students should only be expected to pay if and when they have obtained employment, and earning more than a minimum amount of income.
3. There should be greater availability of bursaries and scholarships, for instance by encouraging prospective employers to invest more in HE.
4. There should be greater availability of financial support for students facing

financial difficulties.

5. Does not deter those students and adults who wish to learn for learning's sake.

In addition, the following policies are suggested:

- Funding

Instead of creating a band of income below £10, 000 to qualify for a grant, which limits the number of families who may qualify, there should be a proportional scale according to income that thereby also raises this threshold for a grant. The grant should be both a significant proportion of the total student fees, in some cases full, and extensive enough to reach out to more deserving students. Moreover, this formula and threshold should be reviewed annually based on relevant macro-economic factors.

- Skills education

Greater attention should be given not only to the standard university courses, but also to short run adult courses targeted at improving specific skills, especially 'economically valuable skills'. To this end, it is not only the responsibility of university professors and college teachers, but also employers and others. Employers should take greater responsibility in the provision of training their staff and local councils should arrange for greater adult courses for all adults to take.

- Practical training

Practical and vocational training should be given importance so that it meets the demands of the workplace, locally, nationally and globally. Therefore, policies in this regard should also be continually reviewed to keep it up to

date, which would necessitate the greater involvement of workplace leaders and employers.