IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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The signatories to this defence of public higher education endorse the principles of the university contained in the *Magna Charta Universitatum*:

> *The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching.*
>
> *To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.*
>
> *Teaching and research in universities must be inseparable if their tuition is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society, and advances in scientific knowledge.*
>
> http://www.magna-charta.org/

Public higher education is not state-controlled higher education, but publicly-funded higher education that respects these principles and secures other public benefits appropriate to a democratic society. These principles and benefits are put at risk by a market in higher education and the entry of for-profit providers.

Executive Summary

1.1 The Coalition government has a vision of the market and how it operates to benefit consumers, but it has no separate vision of higher education and its benefits both to students and wider society. It is now applying its vision of the market to higher education. Its White Paper (2011) and the Browne Report (2010), which preceded it, are the only major policy documents on higher education in the last fifty years to make no mention of the public value of higher education. The only benefits mentioned are the private benefits to individuals in the form of higher earnings deriving from investment in their human capital, and to the 'knowledge economy' in terms of product development and contribution to economic growth.

1.2 These are important benefits, but higher education also serves multiple public benefits, which were articulated in the Robbins Report (1963) and the later Dearing Report (1997). Here, we re-state the values that are at the heart of the current system of public higher education to expose the serious threat to social, political and cultural life that the government's policies for higher education now represent.

1.3 We do so in the context of a lack of leadership by the various mission groups representing universities in the sector – for example, the Russell Group and 1994 Group – and other bodies responsible for the sector. Their defensive approach to financial cuts has meant that by failing to contribute to a proper debate on the values of public higher education they have not met one of the vital functions of a university.[1] This failure to defend the values of public higher education is in marked contrast to the representations made on behalf of for-profit providers, seeking a 'level-playing field' in undergraduate degree provision, despite having no obligation to provide the wider public benefits of public higher education (Policy Exchange 2010).

1.4 The issues at stake are made urgent in the aftermath of the recent riots in English cities. At the very moment that the Prime Minister argues for the need to reverse a 'slow-motion moral decline', his government is responsible for pushing forward rapid changes to higher education that will put the market at the heart of the system. These changes will encourage students to think of themselves as consumers, investing only in their own personal human capital with a view to reaping high financial rewards, and discourage graduates to think of their university education as anything other than something purchased at a high price for private benefit.

1.5 The government's White Paper makes no mention of wider public values and it advocates introducing competition and for-profit providers discharged from all responsibilities for such values. The changes are designed to introduce the market into higher education, but will do so only by evacuating the very values that the Prime Minister otherwise believes are necessary to reverse a 'moral decline'.

1.6 We do not argue against the market, as such, but for the recognition that market relations cannot encompass all social relations and that there are important social conditions that are necessary for markets to flourish.[2] Subjecting education to the market risks undermining what enables both society and markets to flourish. It is illogical that a financial crisis brought about by

[1] The editor of the Times Higher, Ann Mroz, wrote in a leader (January 6th 2011) of a higher education sector "that is rapidly disintegrating in a distasteful display of naked partisan self-interest", suggesting that no one now represents the system as a whole. Available at: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=414762&c=1. Our own campaigns were initiated by ordinary academics and graduate students seeking to fill this vacuum.

[2] Ostensibly, universities are part of what the Prime Minister calls the 'Big Society', that is, autonomous, non-state organisations operating as educational charities.

market failure should be used by government as the occasion for the marketisation of our system of public higher education (Szreter 2011).

1.7 A separate Appendix shows that there is no lasting financial saving to the country, suggesting that the sole motive for the scheme is the misguided ideological belief that the extension of market principles into the provision of university education is itself sufficient justification. Most other OECD countries are making greater public investment in higher education, as a consequence of the global recession. The UK currently has the 3rd highest average level of student fees in OECD countries, after USA and Korea, but with the proposed changes in England it will have the highest (OECD 2011: 258).

1.8 We present our alternative in terms of ***nine propositions about the value of public higher education,*** which are elaborated in the rest of our document. We believe that there is wide public support for them, even in the absence of strong public statements of their significance (see, Ipsos Mori 2010).

Higher education serves public benefits as well as private ones. These require financial support if these benefits are to continue to be provided. (Paras 3.1-3.5)

Public universities are necessary to build and maintain confidence in public debate. (Paras 3.6-3.12)

Public universities have a social mission, contributing to the amelioration of social inequality, which is the corollary of the promotion of social mobility. (Paras 3.13-3.26)

Public higher education is part of a generational contract in which an older generation invests in the wellbeing of future generations that will support them in turn. (Paras 3.27-3.29)

Public institutions providing similar programmes of study should be funded at a similar level. (Paras 3.30-3.32)

Education cannot be treated as a simple consumer good; consumer sovereignty is an inappropriate means of placing students at the heart of the system. (Paras 3.33-3.37)

Training in skills is not the same as a university education. While the first is valuable in its own terms, a university education provides more than technical training. This should be clearly recognised in the title of a university. (Paras 3.38-3.40)

The university is a community made up of diverse disciplines as well as different activities of teaching, research and external collaboration. These activities are maintained by academics, managers, administrators and a range of support staff, all of whom contribute to what is distinctive about the university as a community. (Paras 3.41-3.43)

Universities are not only global institutions. They also serve their local and regional communities and their different traditions and contexts are important. (Paras 3.44-3.50)

2.0 Background

2.1 Government plans for higher education in England propose the biggest overhaul of the sector since the Robbins Report in 1963. The intention then was to create a coherent system and to articulate the principles that should underpin its expansion. This included the principle that a university education should be available to all qualified by ability and attainment who wish to pursue it (1963: Para 31). The outcome of the Robbins reforms, and subsequent developments, is a system of public higher education that is widely regarded as among the best in the world and also one that offers value for money (see, HEPI 2011).[3] Moreover the aspiration for higher education has now been universalised, yet for many these aspirations are likely to be dashed by the prospects of dramatically higher fees.[4]

2.2 The government is planning fundamental changes to the system that it has itself recognised is not broken. Indeed, the current high international standing of UK higher education is widely acknowledged, including by the government (Hotson 2011). It has been unable to articulate any reasons to justify these changes, except the need to cut a financial deficit caused by the bail-out of the banking sector. Yet, this policy runs counter to that advised by the OECD: "public investments in education, particularly at the tertiary level, are rational even in the face of running a deficit in public finances. Issuing government bonds to finance these investments will yield significant returns and improve public finances in the longer term" (OECD 2010). *In an appendix, we set out our analysis of the government's 'mis-selling' of its plans.*

2.3 The government argues that it is merely replacing one way of providing public funding with another that is better because it places the 'student at the heart of the system'. But it proposes that public funding should be directed towards the realisation of the private benefits of higher education and it fails to support the wider public benefits higher education also affords. In truth, the proposals place the market at the heart of the system and represent the student as a consumer of higher education, with loans functioning as a voucher to present at a university of choice (providing that the student has the grades required).

2.4 The government provides no evidence that this will improve the quality of teaching and increase the 'educational gain' of students (White Paper, 2011: Para 2.1), insofar as it is keen to press fees down at most institutions it is clear that many courses of study will receive less funding at the same time as students will pay more. This involves finding 'efficiencies', but, given that the proposals also make 'hours of teaching' – a quantitative measure that varies across subjects - a key indicator of quality, those efficiencies will only be found in increased use of contract staff, increased student-staff ratios, distance learning, and the like.

2.5 In fact, the evidence from Gibbs (2010) cited by the White Paper points to dimensions of quality, most of which are threatened by the proposals since they are all resource dependent – class size, cohort size, extent of close contact with academics, level of student effort and engagement, volume, promptness and usefulness of feedback, proportion of teaching undertaken by full-time academics and proportion of those with postgraduate teaching qualifications (White Paper 2011: Para 2.5). Indeed, the government wishes to encourage new for-profit providers that offer teaching which does not meet these quality criteria,[5] as well as encouraging for-profit providers of curricula which are to be taught by franchised teaching providers.

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[3] Just as the NHS provides better health care outcomes more cheaply than does private health care, so the UK higher education system provides better outcomes than the US system more cheaply.

[4] For example, in a recent survey, 98% of mothers of children born in 2000 expressed their hopes that their child would go to university. See, Wolf (2011).

[5] BPP, for example, has recently declared a course fee of £5000.

2.6 In this way, the government is putting its faith in the idea of market competition to improve a system that is already effective, without any statement of how that improvement might be brought about by the measures being introduced (Collini 2011), and without any attempt to 'trial' the measures by trying them out on a restricted scale.[6]

2.7 It is clear that it intends a system in which there will no longer be similar funding for similar activities. It will be a system of stratified institutions (including for-profit providers with access to students holding publicly-funded loans) charging differential fees for the 'same activity'. Over time, the activity will cease to be the same and there will be a stratification of quality and price; in other words, an 'educational loss', not a 'gain' for the society as a whole. The intention is that institutions should also recruit differentially, with the 'best' students going to the institutions charging higher fees. It is clear that this will further undermine social mobility (see, HEPI 2011).

2.8 But, it will also be a 'rigged' market. Student number controls will remain with quotas for 'core' places. However, the government proposes that places for students with grades at AAB+ will be open for competition among universities at the same time as 20,000 other student places will be open for competition among universities charging £7500 or less. The reason is solely financial: to encourage most universities to charge less, thereby reducing the potential cost of the loan system, which risks spiralling out of control.[7]

2.9 The outcome will be major disruption to universities and their constituent subject areas, with consequences not only for their teaching, but also for their research capacity. This is because they will no longer be able to predict the pattern of student demand and recruitment reliably. At the very heart of a university is the integration of research, scholarship and teaching, yet nowhere does the government acknowledge that these activities are mutually sustaining, or how universities are expected to be able to mitigate the risks to these relationships necessary to a flourishing system of higher education.

2.10 The practical risks of the new arrangements and their contradictory character are clear.[8] These should be sufficient to call the proposals into question. However, in our view, there are more fundamental reasons to be opposed to the dismantling of public higher education.

3.0 NINE PROPOSITIONS IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Proposition 1: Higher education serves public benefits as well as private ones. These are deserving of financial support.

3.1 Universities serve a variety of functions. Perhaps understandably, especially in the context of an economic downturn, governments are concerned with the role of universities in contributing to the economy through technological innovation and the provision of a skilled workforce across a range of occupations and sectors. These include science, technology and innovation, but also business and finance as well as creative industries, social services and the voluntary sector. There is

[6] In many respects, the policies follow policies previously introduced in Sweden for other public services (including schools but not universities). These involve public funding of for-profit providers to compete with state providers. A recent study of the 'benefits' of this competition has shown that neither efficiency nor quality has increased (SNS 2011).

[7] See appendix for further explanation.

[8] One of the objectives of the Browne Report was to secure a stable and sustainable system and yet it has precipitated uncertainty and instability.

scarcely an area of economic life in which higher education does not make a major contribution through research and teaching. The latter provides a workforce that is both qualified and capable of critical, independent thought.

3.2 Students and their families aspire to higher education as a route to a good and satisfying job. It is right that they do so and there is plenty of evidence of the benefits of higher education to individuals, not just in terms of financial rewards (which are, in any case, uncertain), but also in terms of higher levels of satisfaction, health and well-being.[9]

3.3 If these private benefits were the only advantages of higher education, there might be some justification for the argument that they should be privately funded. Until now, the wider benefits of public higher education have been recognised by all political parties at least since the Robbins Report (1963). That Report not only argued for an expanded system, it took an expansive view of university education, setting out the multiple goods that education provided. These included the public benefit of a skilled and educated work force (Paragraph 25),[10] and went further to endorse the importance of higher education in producing 'cultivated' men and women (paragraph 26), securing the advancement of learning through the combination of teaching and research (Paragraph 27), and providing a common culture and standards of citizenship (Paragraph 28).

3.4 The Dearing Report (1997) introduced the idea that students might be asked to pay part of the costs of their degrees. However, at the same time, it affirmed the wider purposes of higher education shared with Robbins. It should, "sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones; [and] be part of the conscience of a democratic society, founded on respect for the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of the individual to society as a whole" (Dearing Report 1997: paragraph 5).

3.5 In contrast, following the lead of the Browne Review, the government now affirms education only in its contribution to the economy and as a private investment in human capital. It welcomes for-profit providers, despite the fact that they have no obligation toward the wider values of a university education. Indeed, it goes further to envisage the market failure of some public universities and their takeover by private providers (Stanfield 2009). [11]

Proposition 2: Public universities are necessary to maintain confidence in public debate.

3.6 For all its stress on 'putting the student at the heart of the system', the White Paper fails to address the nature of the system itself, or the institutions of which it is composed. While the 'student as consumer' is the primary emphasis, little is said of the university as an institution. Indeed, research and teaching are separated in government thinking, with only their utilitarian value acknowledged.

3.7 Yet, in any discussion of the importance of the university to a 'knowledge economy', there is usually recognition of the complexity of modern life and the difficult decisions that have to be made

[9] McMahon (2009: 252) has estimated that the social (i.e. non-private) benefits represent 52% of the total benefits.

[10] Education is a private benefit for the individual, but a skilled and educated workforce can bring benefits even to those who do not themselves pursue higher education as part of activities that generate a wider range of jobs.

[11] Paragraph 4.36 of the BIS Technical Consultation (2011a) discusses the need to protect a university's assets in changes of legal form, but given that the assets of a higher education corporation must always be reserved for charitable and educational purposes, the real sense of this proposal is to facilitate the buy-out or bail-out of a traditional university by a for-profit enterprise.

by governments. These decisions are frequently the object of lobbying by interest groups and of scrutiny by the media, including media owned by large multinational corporations.

3.8 They frequently involve matters in which there are issues of the regulation of corporate activities – for example, over GM crops, and over global warming – or evidence associated with public policies. Here corporations and politicians are clearly interested parties. In these situations universities provide a space in which research is conducted, arguments scrutinised and evidence tested independently of special interests. They are not the only agencies that are necessary for proper public debate, and it is right that universities also be accountable. But, the accountable nature of university research and scholarship is provided by the public nature of the institution – or, at least, the idea of 'publicity' intrinsic to it – not the private contract of the market (containing, as it does, the warning *caveat emptor* and the widespread use of the notion of commercial confidentiality to impede public transparency).

3.9 Public opinion and public trust in institutions, corporations and individuals, have emerged as key issues in complex modern societies.[12] It is not that people necessarily distrust a private corporation, or a politician. But when complex issues are being discussed, it does matter to people just *who* is arguing for a particular position, and whether they have undeclared personal or commercial interests in the outcome. For example, on the matter of 'global warming', the fact that a lobby group is funded by the oil industry is a salient matter. And the fact that a public policy is being criticised by a representative of a political party also plays a role in determining how that criticism will be evaluated.

3.10 Academics have no special virtues different from politicians, or journalists, and each of the different roles has a necessary function. Academics may strive for public recognition (and, thus, be competitive, in that sense[13]), but their primary orientation is to collegial relations of peer review, to the testing of arguments and to public debate. The 'private interest' that an individual academic may have in his or her argument is always qualified by the need for that argument to be persuasive and stand the test of alternative claims and the mobilisation of new evidence. This is what Karl Popper meant when he called scientific knowledge produced within university contexts *critical knowledge* and associated it with the values of the 'open society' (Popper 1963).

3.11 Critical knowledge serves a public good that is guaranteed by the character of the university as an *institution.* Universities are not *aggregates* of individuals, they are *epistemological communities*; that is, communities of scholars and researchers engaged together with issues of truth and validity. It is this that is threatened by the subordination of the university to the market. The new for-profit providers that the government wishes to encourage to enter the sector have no obligations to the production of new knowledge, to serve public debate, or to the sector as a whole. In this way, the public function of higher education is threatened by making it appear that universities are like private corporations with a private interest.

3.12 The future of public higher education also matters not only because higher education prepares individuals to participate as citizens in debate, to understand the nature of expertise and to understand its modes of authority, but also because it provides the space in which expertise is tested and made publicly available. Universities are, of course, also found in hierarchical and authoritarian

[12] See, for example, the concerns expressed by the Royal Society about the 'openness of science': http://royalsociety.org/news/Royal-Society-launches-study-on-openness-in-science/.

[13] See the letter exchange between the Minister of State for Universities and Science and Howard Hotson in the London Review of Books on the nature of competition among academics. It is reproduced at: http://publicuniversity.org.uk/2011/07/20/hotson-versus-willetts-the-debate/.

societies; but democratic societies have a special need for universities and a requirement for them to be open institutions that also educate their students in the values of critical debate.

Proposition 3: Public universities have a social mission, contributing to the amelioration of social inequality, which is the corollary of the promotion of social mobility.

3.13 The White Paper is based on the idea of the autonomous individual capable of self-determination, independence and choice. It develops from this the idea of the individual as a rational consumer and presents the market as the expression of 'consumer sovereignty'. But any emphasis on the autonomous individual must also recognise the dependence of children on their parents and a collective interest on the part of society in their proper development.

3.14 This is the nub of a problem. Since there is a general tolerance of social and material inequalities as the outcome and objective of self-development, the problem arises of how inequalities in the distribution of resources impinge on the development of individuals. It is in this context that equal opportunity necessarily emerges as a key political concern, as it has in the White Paper. Hitherto, public education has been perceived as one of the primary means of supporting equal opportunity and of moderating the potentially unfair advantages of those privileged by birth.

3.15 The Robbins Report inaugurated the main features of our current system of public higher education. It did so in the context of the 1944 Education Act which had established free secondary education. In this way public education has developed as a social right underpinning democratic citizenship. But this took place in the UK in a context where secondary schooling was divided between private fee-paying schools and state-provided schools; and where universities – Oxford and Cambridge in particular – also reflected the implicit status differential between kinds of schools.

3.16 A widespread view at the time of the Robbins reforms was that private schools would gradually diminish in importance, both in terms of the proportion of pupils educated at such schools, and in terms of their capacity to determine life-chances. They might allow families to buy the extra teaching resources to secure access to university education, but the expansion of university places and the creation of a system of public higher education would make university education widely available (including at the older universities) beyond a privately-educated elite. Moreover, the Robbins reforms established the principle that similar courses of study should be similarly supported.

3.17 While the raw examination performance of fee-paying schools is currently better than that of the state-sector (reflecting their greater resources), research from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER 2010) shows that state-educated pupils perform better at university than those from private schools. This is so across the university system, including the most selective universities. As the commentary by the co-funder of the research, the Sutton Trust, states: "Comprehensive school pupils also performed better than their similarly qualified independent and grammar school counterparts in degrees from the most academically selective universities and across all degree classes, awarded to graduates in 2009."[14]

3.18 This new threshold potentially undermines the fair access agenda, where universities offer bright students with potential who come from areas or schools with low HE participation lower A-level entry grades: they may now become reluctant to make offers below AAB. In this new configuration, the government has abrogated its responsibility for improving social mobility, passing it on to universities, who are then incentivised to maximise their recruitment at AAB+.

[14] See, http://www.suttontrust.com/news/news/comprehensive-pupils-outperform/.

3.19 The fact that courses at different universities are currently similarly funded better enables young people from less advantaged backgrounds to achieve their potential. It is precisely this that is now being threatened by the government's proposals. The transformation is happening without public debate or recognition of the significance of what is happening, and many of the steps towards it have been taken administratively, with only piecemeal Parliamentary scrutiny.

3.20 Building on the theme of equality of educational opportunity contained in the Robbins Report, the Dearing Report of 1997 espoused the importance of widening higher education participation and improving access. For both social and economic reasons, Dearing wanted higher education's doors opened, especially to those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, the White Paper subtly redefines both the parameter and scope of this policy focus. Widening participation is trumped by relative 'social mobility' defined in terms of fairness. "*For any given level of skill and ambition, regardless of an individual's background, everyone should have a fair chance of getting the job they want or reaching a higher income bracket*"(para 5.2). So fairness rather than disadvantage is to steer policy. Hence the focus of the fair access agenda – of trying to get more disadvantaged students into the most selective universities rather than opening university doors to a wider cross-section of students.

3.21 The government proposes that institutions should be stratified and be differentially funded for providing the same courses. Moreover, with the introduction of the 'core and margin system' for student places, it proposes that the 'best' students – those achieving grades at AAB+ - should go to the 'best' institutions. Since pupils from the much better resourced private schools (pupil-staff ratios are fully 75%-100% higher on average) outperform those from state schools at this key point of entry into universities, they disproportionately achieve AAB+ scores, and so the new arrangements would entrench that purchased advantage by facilitating their better access to better resourced universities.

3.22 An additional assumption that underpinned the expansion of higher education was that a 'knowledge economy' would be associated with a general amelioration of inequality, in terms of a general decline in the range of inequalities. This was broadly true until the 1980s, when the situation began to reverse. Britain is now a highly unequal country, with the top ten per cent having wealth around 100 times greater than the bottom tenth, and where someone just in the top ten per cent of wage-earners has earnings around four times higher than someone in the lowest ten per cent (NEP 2010). This level of earnings inequality, as well as the incidence of low pay, is high by international standards (OECD 2011). At the start of the 21st century, inequality of incomes in Britain is greater than at any time in the last 40 years.[15]

3.23 Trends at the very top have been striking. Atkinson and Salverda (2005) have used tax records to show that the share of income of the top 0.05 per cent (roughly the 'top ten thousand') fell between the mid-1920s and mid-1970s but then grew so rapidly that by 1999 their share of income was higher than it had been in 1937. The top 1%, even in the year 2000, accounted for 13% of total incomes, compared with 6.5% in 1978 (Atkinson 2007). It is this group that is well-represented in the current cabinet.

3.24 This pattern of inequality is a product of government policy (initially by Conservative and Labour governments since the 1980s and continued by the present coalition government). Now universities are being asked to reinforce it. The issue of students paying for their higher education

[15] Income inequality was relatively stable during the 1960s and 1970s; rising inequality of incomes may be traced to changes happening in the 1980s in particular. This has not been reversed since then, although there has been some stability in recent years. New Labour devoted attention to levels of poverty, not inequality (McKay and Rowlingson 2008).

arises precisely because of the high financial returns said to result from education and the changes in the tax system to benefit the better off. At the same time, deregulation of labour markets has undermined the returns to semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. This makes it seem that those in such jobs have no interest in the future of higher education and neither the means, nor, the government believes, the incentive, to help pay for it. A shift from government paying the bulk of the costs of higher education, to individual students (and often in effect their families), is a shift from *all people* in Britain having an interest in higher education, towards it becoming something that is only sensibly embarked upon if it is in the private interest of an individual or their family.

3.25 But not all jobs employing people with higher education qualifications have high incomes (see, Brown et al 2011). The government intends that those degree programmes that lead to higher paying jobs should be able to charge higher fees, but also that these should be aligned with particular high status, selective institutions. In effect, they are creating a system in which education will also function as a 'positional good' and those institutions with the greatest 'positional' effects will be disproportionately available to those able to pay (whether by virtue of the advantages bestowed by private schools, or by virtue of the disincentive effects of higher fees).[16]

3.26 In effect, what is being brought about is *a stratified system of higher education for a stratified Britain*.

Proposition 4: Public higher education is part of a generational contract in which an older generation invests in the wellbeing of generations that will support them in turn.

3.27 The unfairness of the new system is not only evident in the way it will reinforce current socio-economic inequalities. It also represents a form of generational injustice. The government's general argument is that a failure to reduce the current fiscal deficit would be unfair on future generations.[17] Yet its means of reducing the deficit is to shift the burden of funding higher education from the current taxpayers onto the future generations of students. In fact, insofar as the savings are 'illusory' and build up a cost for future taxpayers, future generations of students are doubly burdened, required to pay back their student loans and be the taxpayers who will have to pay the costs of an unsustainable system, bearing the burden of the residual debts that will be written off after 30 years. At the same time, current taxpayers – including those who have benefited from public higher education – are rewarded by lower taxation.

3.28 This generational injustice is systematic. The widening inequalities described above have also given rise to a decline in opportunities across generations. For example, children born in 1958 have adult earnings less closely matched to their parents than children born in 1970 (Blanden and Machen 2008). Indeed, Blanden and Machen argue that "social mobility worsened and took a step change downwards, leaving the UK near the bottom of the intergenerational league table of mobility, and on a different trajectory relative to other countries in the world where there is less evidence of [retrogressive] changes over time ... This fall in mobility was accompanied by strong increases in educational inequalities (e.g. a very sharp rise in the association between educational attainment and family income and stronger links between test scores and behavioural measures and family income)" (2008: 3).

[16] It is not possible, at this stage, to predict the impact of the reforms and increases in tuition fees on individual's higher education aspirations, their participation rates, and higher education choices. Nor is it clear if the student support put in place is adequate to off- set the fee increases (Dearden et al 2010). However, US research (Mundel 2008) does confirm that those most likely to be affected will be low-income students who are more price sensitive than their wealthier peers – the very targets of social mobility.

[17] Indeed, the present Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts has written a book on this topic (Willetts 2010), but his argument applies to his own reforms.

3.29 The current policies can only exacerbate the problem, by reinforcing the very conditions that create the problem of reduced social mobility. Indeed, this is the case for government policies across the board, from the abolition of 'Sure Start', to the radical changes to the Educational Maintenance Allowance, and the abolition of 'Aim Higher'. These changes all undermine the ability of universities, schools, colleges and other agencies to work together to improve achievement and, thus, mobility.

Proposition 5: Public institutions providing similar courses should be funded at a similar level.

3.30 **I**nstead of being encouraged to compete between themselves, universities should be encouraged to collaborate in their local areas in raising the educational aspirations of people in their community and as part of a project to develop educational aspiration, rather than to recruit individuals to particular universities. Raised educational aspirations are a public benefit – whether the ultimate destination of the people concerned is university or other forms of education.

3.31 Future generations will be expected to pay more to "invest in their own future." At the same time, they will bear the burden of supporting current older generations, whose pensions and other requirements for care will, at least in part, be paid out of their taxes. Already we are anticipating a generation of young people who will expect to be worse off in the future than their parents, at the same time as parental wealth will become more significant in 'buffering' the more advantaged young people from this (whether by providing better access to higher education or to private housing).[18]

3.32 The consequences of the new market in higher education are damaging to the public benefits of higher education, which in turn justify continued direct public funding. Equally, they are damaging to the social fabric exactly insofar as widening inequalities are associated with reduced opportunities for social mobility and damage to the well being of those without the aptitude for higher education, but equally deserving of better living standards. But *still* the government argues that they are placing the student at the heart of the system, and that the changes to the financing of higher education represent policies to address the deficit in which 'we are all in it together'.

Proposition 6: Education cannot be treated like a simple consumer good; consumer sovereignty is an inappropriate means of placing students at the heart of the system.

3.33 Competition, it is argued, will benefit students as consumers. It is argued that this benefit will be brought about through 'efficiencies' in teaching. But this is likely to be at the cost of the other benefits that are lost when education is cast simply in terms of effective training in specific skills associated with employability. This is so for students and for their teachers. The White Paper, unlike the Robbins Report, or the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, makes no mention of the university needing teachers who are also researchers, providing the opportunity for the latest knowledge and ideas to inform the education of their students.

3.34 Within higher education, the student-teacher relationship is paramount. The quality of education is better where both student and teacher are engaged in a common inquiry. This is why Robbins argued that universities should be concerned with providing an appropriate context for teachers to pursue scholarship and research – as part of the process of exemplifying for students the practices of critical inquiry. Students need to be taught by individuals who draw on new ideas and

[18] Indeed, spiralling higher education costs (as indicated by above-inflation rises in fees) in the USA, which are a necessary part of the marketisation of higher education, notwithstanding government protestations to the contrary, have already produced a significant generational effect, where, in many states, children have lower uptake of higher education than did their parents.

the history of their subject, and do so in dialogue with others. This is as true for courses rooted in modern sciences and technologies as it is for the humanities and social sciences. For students to develop a critical understanding of scientific and social theories, cultures and institutions and of the context of social policies, they need to be taught by independent and critical thinkers.

3.35 As Robbins put it, "Universities have an obligation to preserve and advance knowledge and to serve the intellectual needs of the nation. University teachers must keep abreast of new developments in their subjects and need time for reflection and personal study. Many also want to make their own contribution to such developments and this desire must not be frustrated if they are to remain intellectually alive. In addition, the influence and authority of those who have become acknowledged experts in their own fields of study radiate out far beyond the walls of the university in which they teach" (1963: Para 520).

3.36 Yet the government wishes to allow the title of university to any institution that provides a degree-level course of vocational *training* and to allow degree courses to be provided by corporations like Pearson and Edexcel that will supply curriculum content to tutors who have no part in determining it.

3.37 In line with its emphasis on the market, the White Paper promotes the idea that students will be able to exercise effective choice when equipped with proper information. But the choice of a degree programme is not like the choice of a washing machine. It is a 'one-off' choice that many will make at age 17 (having made earlier choices at 14 and 15 that might well constrain subsequent ones). Any 'mistakes' that are made – choice of the wrong university or the wrong programme are not rectifiable, except at large cost to the individual student and may not even be discovered until after a course has been completed. The experience in the USA has been that opening up the system of student support to for-profit providers has made it highly vulnerable to mis-selling and exploitation (see, Hotson 2011).

> **Proposition 7: Training in skills is not the same as a university education. While the first is valuable in its own terms, a university education provides more than technical training. This should be clearly recognised in the title of a university.**

3.38 Professional and vocational courses hold an important place within higher education, but the government's proposed system distorts the broader, more fundamental aim of a university which is to foster the critical thinking, learning and understanding of the individual, and to encourage his or her personal engagement with the social and intellectual diversity that is available both globally and locally.

3.39 But the government presents higher education as simply *training for employment* and turns its back on the wider purpose of education. According to the White Paper, students should be 'equipped to excel in the workforce' (Paragraph 3.28). Degree courses are to offer 'value for money', universities are encouraged to 'build [...] deeper links with business' (Paragraph 3.29) and to 'align course content' with employers' needs (Paragraph 3.35). The task of lecturers is to 'transmit course content' (Paragraph 3.5).

3.40 As Robbins argued, while "there is no betrayal of values when institutions of higher education teach what will be of some practical use, we must postulate that what is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind" (1963: Paragraph 26). These 'powers of the mind' are relevant in employment as well as in other aspects of public life. Like Robbins, we do not discount the importance and value of technical training, but a university education is different from technical training and there is a fundamental diminution of the quality of

education when it is delivered as if it were just equivalent to technical training. Those who learn their technical skills outside a university setting must also benefit from the fact that those skills may have been enhanced and developed within institutions concerned with research and scholarship as well as with technical practice.

> **Proposition 8: The university is a community made up of diverse disciplines as well as different activities of teaching, research and external collaboration. These activities are maintained by academics, managers, administrators and a range of support staff, all of whom contribute to what is distinctive about the university as a community**.

3.41 The White Paper demonstrates the failure of the government to see Universities as diverse communities, made up of researchers, teachers, students, administrators and support staff who work together to provide an education – not just 'training for employability'.

3.42 The essence of true choice in university is embodied in the diversity of subjects. It will be eroded by the proposals to allow narrowly-based new providers to cherry-pick courses, by the removal of public funding from the arts, humanities and social sciences, and by the proposals to reinforce the market position of 'selective universities', which will make them not simply more selective academically, but also more selective socially. Some institutions have a greater specialism in vocational subjects, others foster excellence in the natural sciences, medicine and technology, and others still specialise in the arts, performance and cultural analysis. What matters is that such diversity be properly funded so that each institution can provide the education appropriate to its context, and that each institution should be capable of developing in relation to that context.

3.43 People also come together in universities as a community of individuals from different walks of life, different social classes, backgrounds, and ethnicities, to create new ideas, foster mutual understanding, and to become motivated about their future and the future of others around them. University should be accessible to everyone, because society benefits from maximising heterogeneity which generates the new ideas universities explore and publish. Crucially, they are places in which disciplines intersect, where geneticists meet philosophers of ethics, where performers meet doctors and architects, where lawyers meet experts in language use. Market forces work against this crucial principle of sustaining diversity.

> **Proposition 9: Universities are not only global institutions. They also serve their local and regional communities and their different traditions and contexts are important.**

3.44 Many vice-chancellors – especially those who believe that their university might be one of those in the top tier – are inclined to emphasise the global nature of higher education. But universities are not virtual entities. They exist in particular contexts and serve local and regional needs, as well as national and international ones. Indeed, a report by the New Economics Foundation states that, "Universities yield benefits way beyond the individual financial returns to students and human-capital gains for the economy. We find that just three social outcomes – greater political interest, higher interpersonal trust and better health – contribute a benefit of £1.31 billion to UK society over and above the economic benefits." (2011; see also British Academy 2010, and UCU 2010).

3.45 Universities are now fully integrated into the life of communities across the UK, with nearly every major town and city boasting at least one university that contributes in numerous ways both to the local economy and to the region's cultural life. Universities enhance the life chances of local young people and those seeking a return to education later in life, but they also provide broader cultural facilities that contribute to the cultural life of the towns and cities in which they are located.

3.46 Many public universities are at the heart of their community, providing employment and contributing to a vibrant local culture. In many places, they have provided an alternative to the decline of other employment and industries, taking over derelict buildings and re-energising localities.

3.47 Yet the White Paper announces that it is sanguine about public universities going 'bust': "like its predecessors, the government does not guarantee to underwrite universities and colleges" (Paragraph 6.9). The implication is that such an eventuality would only mark the loss of a weak or a 'marginal' institution. In truth, it would be a consequence of an institution having been pushed to the margin by government policies and the instabilities they have caused. An artificial supply-side mechanism controlling recruitment numbers will make it more difficult for universities to recruit, even though total demand for higher education currently outstrips the number of places available. Waiting in the wings, however, will be for profit providers seeking access to cheap 'infrastructure', able to take over 'ailing' public institutions in new 'private-public' partnerships. A private, for-profit university would have no interest in meeting the broader public remit nor the interests of the local economy in which it is located – its primary responsibility is to its owners, investors and shareholders.

3.48 The university sector is also very much bigger than a narrow group of elite universities. The bulk of England's universities – and there are well over 100 of them – are located in the regions. Every year, they accept thousands of students from poor and non-traditional backgrounds and support them through their studies. These universities train tomorrow's nurses, paramedics, social workers, teachers and many other kinds of professionals – not to mention future business leaders and entrepreneurs.

3.49 Many of these institutions have excellent records of helping their students secure graduate employment opportunities that would not have been available to them if they had never gone to university. In short, it is local and regional universities that do the heavy-lifting on social mobility – not the most selective universities. They are *already* engines of social mobility. And in many parts of England, they are often engines of economic growth as well. The government seems determined that universities should be engines for social and regional inequality instead.

3.50 Current universities whose financial viability may be threatened are not marginal institutions. They are providing very considerable benefits to their local economy and cultural life. They will be rendered marginal only as a consequence of a government policy that seeks to promote for-profit providers and their shareholders' interests, turning higher education into a market opportunity at the cost of wider public and social benefits.

APPENDIX: GOVERNMENT MIS-SELLING OF ITS WHITE PAPER

A.1 The government's Comprehensive Spending Review announced in November 2010 reduced by 80% HEFCE's budget for undergraduate teaching, with all such funding to Band C and Band D subjects cut.[19] Through this drastic cut, the government will save £2.9 billion from departmental annual expenditure on higher education (by 2014/15 when the new regime is fully implemented). Although spending on higher education represents a small proportion of around £600 billion of public expenditure, in the government's overarching narrative everyone must do their bit to help reduce the deficit – that is, the difference between annual income and expenditure.

A.2 It is further claimed that such austerity measures are needed to protect the government's ability to borrow at low interest rates by selling gilts (Treasury bonds). On this argument, the financial health of the UK is predicated on reducing the deficit in order to protect its credit rating and remain an attractive haven for international investors, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer put it.[20] Yet, this policy runs counter to that advised by the OECD: "public investments in education, particularly at the tertiary level, are rational even in the face of running a deficit in public finances. Issuing government bonds to finance these investments will yield significant returns and improve public finances in the longer term" (OECD 2010).

A.3 Moreover, the deficit is not the only measure of national financial health. The debt – the relation between national assets and liabilities – is also part of the picture and, from this perspective, the government's proposals make little economic sense. In fact, both the debt and the deficit would be assessed by credit ratings agencies when coming to a decision on the overall health and creditworthiness of the UK.

A.4 Independent analysis shows that the saving could be illusory (see, Hepi 2010, 2011). It takes the very considerable cost of funding the loan system 'off the books' in an accounting sense, but leaves a large potential cost to the Treasury in the long run, estimated by Hepi (2011) at £2.1billion. In this respect it resembles the controversial, if not completely discredited, PFI/PPP initiatives. Moreover, the judgments about the balance of savings to the government and costs to students are dependent on highly speculative estimates about future economic performance and earnings (see, Hepi 2011).

A.5 Each year the government is required to issue Treasury bonds to finance the loans made to students. This form of borrowing is not classed as annual expenditure as the spending creates an asset that will generate future income for the government (graduate repayments). Borrowing to finance loans is not therefore recorded as annual expenditure and only shows up in the deficit in a reduced and roundabout fashion (the RAB convention).

A.6 Displacing the costs of tuition from grants to fees backed by loans, changes the place of those costs on the government's accounts. On its accounting convention, the deficit is reduced in the short-term, but with the consequence that debt will climb over the coming decades. The Office of Budgetary Responsibility, and official figures released by the Department of Business, Innovation and

[19] These are primarily arts, humanities and social science subjects. A similar level of cut has been applied to higher cost Band A and B science and medicine subjects (STEM), which retain a modest block grant. The absence of a block grant allocation to arts, humanities and social sciences had considerably symbolic significance within the academic community, although subsequent analysis has suggested that the potential damage to STEM subjects from the 'core and margin' arrangements is likely to be greater than to arts, humanities and social sciences (Hepi 2011).

[20] The Scotsman, 12 August 2011. Available at: http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/politics/Britainnow-a-safe-haven.6817145.jp.

Skills, show that an additional £7billion of borrowing is required each year from 2015 to finance increased student fees and maintenance loans. On the government's own figures (as made available to Hepi), the outstanding amount on the loan portfolio will peak at £191billion in today's prices sometime around 2046. Since the outstanding loan currently totals £35billion, this represents a huge increase in national debt. The government is merely deferring the problem of financing higher education by reducing annual expenditure in the short-term but building up large debts.

A.7 In shifting from grants to institutions to loans to students, many of the savings claimed from the deficit may be lost once other factors are included. For example, London Economics (2011) argue that the government has failed properly to assess the impact on future tax revenues if higher fees deter applicants and hence reduce the number of future graduates paying higher taxes. Using models of demand provided by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, London Economics estimates that Exchequer revenues could reduce by £3.72 billion per annum in present value terms – erasing the saving from the deficit. On their figures, the Exchequer will be *£2.39 billion worse off* as a result of the proposed changes to higher education funding.

A.8 Further, the Consumer Prices Index, a measure of inflation used to determine public sector pension and other benefits, may be affected by higher tuition fees. Tuition fees are included in the basket of goods used to calculate CPI. One investment firm has estimated that an average fee level of £8,200 after waivers would have an impact on CPI equivalent to 65 basis points which could require an additional £2.2billion of annual expenditure to meet the increase in pensions (Cullerne Bown 2011).

A.9 Once one gets beyond the simplistic accounting presentation used by the government, the claimed savings evaporate and the increased debt becomes more of an issue. On the latter point, the loan scheme increasingly looks more of a liability than an asset. The government's estimates as to the size of the default and write-off costs are also problematic. The government's original estimate (repeated in the White Paper) of such costs was 30% of loans made, but in its recent calculations a figure of 32% has been used (BIS 2011a) – other independent assessments are higher (Million+ 2010). London Economics calculates a figure of 37%.[21] If the actual default rates prove to be closer to those of London Economics, then the additional costs – around £500milllion per year – eat further into the claimed savings (Hepi 2011).

A.10 The government's estimates are produced with a number of other assumptions that are now questionable: that student numbers remain constant until 2050, that the average fee after waivers is £7,500 and that graduate earnings profiles will reflect historic trends. Such vagaries are exacerbated by the government's accounting convention. Any shortfall in repayments received will have to be met by future taxpayers or by graduates who may need to make repayments on terms which differ from those on which the scheme was sold to parliament. As London Economics noted, "unless there is a fundamental shift up in either the earnings or employment outcomes of graduates in the future, it is probably the case that this financial asset will start to be significantly eroded at some point in the future. However, it may require several years to assess whether new borrowers do in fact require higher subsidies/write offs than the current cohorts of student loan recipients."[22]

A.11 Grant expenditure today would reduce these future risks. From the perspective of broader economic value, as opposed to accounting for the deficit, cutting grants make little saving and has economic implications that the government has not factored into its calculations adequately.Given

[21] See their written submission to the BIS future of higher education inquiry, available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmbis/writev/885/885.pdf

[22] See their written submission, referenced in the previous footnote.

these arguments, it is clear that the government's move to loans is ideologically, rather than fiscally, driven. The prime aim is privatisation of which loans form a core component.

A.12 This is also at an overall cost of severe instability to the higher education sector as a whole. While the Browne Review promised financial stability for the system, the government's policies introduce serious instability through its 'core and margin' proposals. The core is reduced at each institution by at least 8% in order to create the lower pool. Competitive tendering means that no university is guaranteed to replace the numbers it has lost. Incentivising universities to drop their average fees below £7,500 mainly succeeds in getting institutions to shift their access arrangements around moving money from bursaries, which support students while studying, to fee waivers, which reduce graduate debt but also lower the size of the loan book.

A.13 But the present measures taken to reduce the size of the loan book presage other methods in the future. These include a 'sale' that will largely be mediated through financial instruments – credit derivatives of some new flavour, while HEFCE has been given responsibility for ensuring that the publicly funded loans are spent appropriately. The government is keen to introduce a new pricing mechanism to higher education based on the institution-specific loan repayment and default rates (that is, a mechanism based on how much of the loans made to students studying degree x at the University of Y is returned to the Exchequer). A function of fee levels and graduate earnings profiles, such a measure would put a crude price and value for money on universities and departments. Both these approaches would commodify higher education in a fashion not seen before in the UK, nor anywhere else for that matter.

A.14 The commodification of higher education is the secret heart of the White Paper, which the government does not wish to debate openly. The government seeks a differently funded sector, one which can provide new outlets for capital that struggles to find suitable opportunities for investment elsewhere. Against the backdrop of collapsed productivity in traditional sectors, we are in a new phase of private sector stimulus at the expense of public provision. The role of government will act as a broker for private investment in services and it will be achieved on higher levels of individual indebtedness and higher leveraging at institutions. These are the very conditions which have given rise to the current financial crisis.

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