

Policy watch

'Aiming Higher.' The Government's strategy for HE in the future



21 months after it first launched its Great Debate into '*what a world-class HE system in the future should look like in this country,*' the Government releases its long-awaited [Final Report](#).

It's a quest that has taken in nine commissioned Papers from sector experts, six comment Papers from significant users of higher education, numerous roundtable discussions and no doubt endless supplies of coffee. The result is a hefty 120 page Report, confirming the importance of the HE sector to the UK economy but highlighting three key principles around which future development of the sector should be built. Firstly, an economic imperative with business and HE working together "*through joint research programmes, part sponsored vocationally orientated courses, sponsorship of students and greater use of universities for management and leadership training.*" Secondly, a major role in increasing social mobility; "*no bar to the widest possible access to higher learning for all those with the talent and motivation to benefit.*" And thirdly, a much more transparent customer focus; "*by requiring course content and outcomes to be more transparent, students and employers will be enabled to make informed choices that increase competition between institutions.*"

A lot has happened since John Denham unleashed the Great Debate in February 2008: the sponsoring Dept has changed; the numbers applying for higher education have ballooned; the quality systems for HE provision have been questioned; the expectations of students, employers and politicians have intensified; the global challenges have increased; and the national economy has struggled.

Yet one thing has remained constant and that is the continuing importance of higher education to the UK. This was recognised by Lord Mandelson in his Foreword to the Report, "*higher education equips people with the skills that globalisation and a knowledge economy demand*" and it was recognised in a Report released by Universities UK (UUK) on virtually the same day. According to the UUK survey, for instance, universities currently generate £59bn for the economy, up nearly £15bn over the last 5 years, create in one form or another over 668,500 jobs, earn around £23bn through consultancies and other services, employ more than 1% of the total UK workforce and have an inestimable knock-on effect on local economies. In a Report full of hard facts and soft charts, the conclusion is clear: "*higher education has become a core part of the economic infrastructure of the country and its regions; generating employment and output, attracting export earnings and contributing to gross domestic product.*"

So what of the future? This Report sees HE's future built around six "*proposals.*"

First, ensuring access to all who can benefit. This has been more than a mantra to Labour over the last decade, it has been something the Party has invested in and campaigned on in equal measures. It hasn't always been easy and indeed the latest OECD [figures](#) show the UK slipping down the participation tables from 7th to 15th as others overtake fast. The government, however, remains committed to a 50%

participation rate for young people and the Conservatives too seem to have recognised the case for continued growth but the issue is how best to achieve this? The answer, the Report suggests, lies partly in sponsored study and bursaries but also in "*greater diversity of models of learning: part-time, work-based, foundation degrees and home study.*" Particular measures to support this include: beefing up advice and guidance for young people as indicated in the recent [IAG strategy](#), tailoring support for high performing pupils from low income backgrounds, strengthening progression from vocational routes such as apprenticeships and BTECs, encouraging more foundation degree programmes as well as more HE provision in FE and getting the Director of [OFFA](#) to review access to some of the more selective universities.

Second, strengthening universities' economic contribution. Lord Mandelson was quick to point out that universities should not be seen as '*factories for workers*' nor equally as '*ivory towers,*' rather, as the earlier UUK figures indicated, as significant contributors to the UK economy. This means universities supporting the '[New Industries, New Jobs](#)' industrial activism policy, in particular the drive for STEM skills and '[Jobs for the Future.](#)' It also means greater collaboration with business as identified in the recent CBI '[Stronger Together](#)' Report, as well as a new role for the UK Commission on planning how HE provision can best meet skill shortages and a continued emphasis on developing graduate employability.

Third, raising the bar on the quality of teaching partly through the current review of the external examiner system, partly through better institutional recognition of excellence in teaching but significantly, through the growing interest in what is known as course labelling. This latter idea, which is attracting interest in FE as well, would see greater transparency being introduced on what students could expect from a particular course, the skills and knowledge they would gain, how they might be assessed, the support they might expect and where the course might lead to in terms of progression. For many this is the inevitable result of granting consumers purchasing power but equally it's seen as a way of driving up standards by highlighting competitively what's on offer. [HEFCE](#), [QAA](#) and [UKCES](#) will look at how to make this happen in HE.

Fourth, strengthening universities' role as core social and economic players in communities be they local or international. Few new proposals are offered here partly perhaps because many universities already do this often through their engagement with RDAs, others are starting to do this through the New University Challenge [programme](#) while others already have recognised positions at the hub of local communities. An important contributor to such positioning may well come through the [Brindley](#) task force on e-learning.

Fifth, developing UKHE research capacity by building on the Innovation Fund model, adopting new measuring tools and focusing on economic benefits.

Sixth, and finally, doing all this and more within what's described here as "*an environment of fiscal constraint.*" As the Report concludes: "*in future the burden of financing HE's diversity of excellence will need to be more equitably shared between employers, taxpayer and individuals.*" How that burden might be funded in the future now moves centre stage as the fees review gets under way but this Report is more than just a warm-up act.

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