



2010/23

15 June 2010

Higher education was one of the more difficult policy issues that the Coalition Parties had to deal with last month as they drew up the [Coalition Agreement for Government](#). The problem was the different stances on tuition fees but with a review of fees and funding in full swing, there was an obvious opportunity to put things on hold and wait until Lord Browne had completed his review, probably now sometime in early autumn.

Currently that's how things stand but the Agreement did make proposals in two other areas of higher education both of which cropped up in keynote speeches on HE last week. One was greater course transparency, *"we will publish more information about the costs, graduate earnings and student satisfaction of different university courses"* and the other was to look again at financial support for part-time students. Support for part-time learners was picked up in a [speech](#) on *'universities and business working together in an age of austerity'* by Richard Lambert, the Director-General of the CBI while greater course transparency formed part of the [speech](#) on future challenges to universities by David Willetts. Together the two speeches provide interesting reference points for a debate on HE that is now taking place in a much sharper economic climate.

The last few weeks for example have seen public hand wringing about the impact of the additional cuts imposed on HE, now facing a further £200m of *"efficiencies,"* and public anxiety about the pressure on places this summer. As David Willetts pointed out, HE is now clearly much more than an aspiration for the few, it's *"a rite of passage that can set you up for the future."* How best to provide and fund such a 'rite' to increasing numbers while at the same time ensuring the quality of provision, the international standing of UKHE research and a flow of high-level skills for the future is something that governments let alone HE institutions have been grappling with for sometime.

The previous Secretary of State, Lord Mandelson, set out his vision for HE in the form of a [White Paper](#) last November. This was a vision based around *"autonomous institutions with diverse missions all delivered to excellent standards, backed by a mixture of state and private funding."* The Secretary of State before him, John Denham, launched a series of reviews as part of a strategy *"to create a 10-15 year framework for the expansion and development of HE in Britain."* So what about the present incumbent, David Willetts, where's he coming from? In a characteristically reflective speech last week, he wove together two distinct strands of thinking.

First, the economic and social strand that higher education should serve as a route to develop high-level skills as much as intellectual rigour and curiosity. *"To me,"* he argued in another speech a couple of weeks ago, *"the only Mickey Mouse degree is one that's mediocre, or sloppy, or lacking rigour and depth. Beyond that, I'm not going to judge what people study or what colleges and universities offer."* But what he did want to do was to ensure that people had access to the right information and advice before they selected a particular course and that universities and colleges offering degrees provided details about how such courses could help students progress into the world of work. This was to be done through a system of programme-based employability statements.

Employability statements were being worked on by the previous administration but have been seized on by the Coalition as an expression of the sort of openness and transparency that they want to bring to public life in general. Indeed HEFCE itself is in the process of bringing together a lot of the data about the student experience, some captured through the [National Student Survey](#) and some through Teaching Quality

Information, into a more comprehensive quality assurance framework and employability statements would sit well within this. Consultation on this wider approach is due in the autumn.

For the moment the aim is for such statements comprising "*short summaries of what universities and colleges offer students to support their employability and their transition into employment and beyond*" to be in place for all institutions offering higher level provision by the end of August this year. The structure of these things is not being prescribed in advance though HEFCE is suggesting they should include amongst other things: work experience opportunities, evidence of professional recognition for courses, support for the development of employability skills and what's on offer in terms of career planning. Over time they are intended to become unique selling points, marks of distinction for institutions.

Second, David Willetts wove in a political strand in the form of an idea that he felt '*could provide a cost-effective way of spreading educational opportunity in straitened times while generating more social mobility and providing incentives to focus on high-quality teaching.*' The essence of this win-win idea is to unhook teaching and learning from examining, "*creating institutions that can teach but do so to an exam set externally.*"

It's an idea that has been around for a while and indeed there are models to prove it such as the Open University's validation [service](#) and the BTEC HN licence system. An obvious template that has been suggested is that of London University, a conglomerate of 19 colleges and universities with over 45,000 students enjoying different modes of study but where reach and volume could be further enhanced by having satellite teaching centres attached to a single validation hub. David Willetts only wanted a "*a conversation about the future direction of the sector*" at this stage but it may be one that many want to participate in.

As for support for part-time students, this was one of six key priorities for the HE sector identified in a speech by Richard Lambert a couple of days earlier. Although as he admitted, he was approaching things "*from a business perspective,*" the CBI has had a long-term interest in HE and the knowledge economy as evidenced by their [Task Force Report](#) last year. On part-time students, for instance, Richard Lambert felt "*a rethink*" was needed to allow more flexible forms of provision to be developed, something that was difficult to do while the current system was '*concentrated so heavily on full-time students who have recently left school.*' He also felt that the loans for full-time students should reflect the real rate of borrowing, an issue that may become critical if the cap is raised.

Other priorities identified in the speech included high-level research, which he felt should be subject to more open competition; student numbers, which should be driven more by need than generic targets, particularly as the need at present is for a stronger work-based route into HE; and how HE might shape up for the future particularly as funding tightens. He suggested that possible salvation lay in adopting more collaborative models, "*this has been happening elsewhere in Europe, in countries like Denmark, Finland and France and some UK academics are starting to put forward radical ideas on these lines.*" More lessons from abroad perhaps.

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