

## **Student numbers and funding– Does Robbins add up?**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how the Robbins Report's recommendations for a massive expansion in higher education alongside a comprehensive system of student financial support, both financed by the public purse, came about and were translated into policy. It argues that these policies, including the Robbins principle, the desire for expanding educational opportunities plus the Reports' emphasis upon the public and social benefits of higher education, can only be understood within the context of the Welfare State and the values and ideas enshrined in its post-war development. In addition, the article examines some of the Robbins Reports' projections about the number of student places demanded and compares these with the actual number of students enrolled, highlighting the changes in the composition of the student body overtime. It concludes by exploring issues concerning student funding and highlights the shifts in thinking about role of higher education, who benefits, and so who pays, changes associated with the end of the post-war consensus about the Welfare State.

## **Student numbers and funding– Does Robbins add up?<sup>1</sup>**

Reading the 1963 Robbins Report 50 years on, one cannot help but be affected by the power of the report: its optimism about higher education; and its enthusiasm for, and conviction about its expansion, alongside higher education's role in meeting the needs of both individuals and society. The Report proposed that the number of full-time student places in Great Britain, including undergraduates and postgraduates and home and international students, should rise from 216,000 in 1962/63 to 558,000 in 1980/81 (Robbins Report, 1963: Appendix 1 Table 53). So full-time higher education participation would increase from 8.4 per cent in 1962/3 (Robbins Report, 1963: Appendix 1, para 131, p 148) to 17 per cent in 1980/81 (Robbins Report, 1963: Appendix 1, para 132, p 150).<sup>2</sup> It assumed that an expanded higher education meant increased educational opportunities - that young people in the 'pool of ability,' defined mainly as those with 2 or more A Levels, whose class or gender had hitherto kept them out of higher education might be drawn into higher education. The Report was quite clear that its recommended expansion was justified on the ground of the national economy. The rationale for both providing higher education and expanding educational opportunities funded via the public purse was formulated quite specifically in these terms (Finch 1984, p 28).

Robbins was convinced that the increase in public expenditure - from £206 million in 1962/3 to £742 million in 1980/81 - that his proposals required 'will be remunerative both in its absolute effects on the general productivity..... and in helping to maintain our competitive position in the world at large.' (Robbins Report, 1963: p 273). This meant that the proportion of GNP devoted to higher education was estimated to rise from 0.8 per cent in 1962/3 to 1.6 per cent in 1980/81 (Robbins Report, 1963: p 273). This target was nearly met by 1980 but has subsequently declined. According to the latest OECD figures, in 2010 GDP on Tertiary education in the UK amounted to just 1.4 per cent, below the OECD average of 1.6 per cent (OECD, 2013, Table 2B.1). In terms of public spending on higher education as a proportion of GDP, the UK is among the lowest in the group, at 0.7 per cent (OECD, 2013, Table 2B.3). And public spending on higher education is set to fall further, following the 2012 reforms of higher education encapsulated in the 2011 White Paper (BIS, 2011). From today's perspective, the Robbins Report seems audacious, or just unreal. In these times of austerity, it is hard to imagine a proposal recommending a rise of 260% in public expenditure on higher education over the next 20 years, and that such a proposal would be so readily accepted by the government of the day, or, to think about a higher education landscape in England without tuition fees and student loans.

This article attempts to unravel why these changes came about, arguing that they can only be understood within the context of the post-war development of the Welfare State. It then examines some of the Robbins Reports' projections about the number of student places demanded and compares these with the actual number of students enrolled, highlighting the changes in the composition of the student body overtime. In the final section issues about student funding are explored.

### **Robbins and the Welfare State**

The changes Robbins proposed do not obviously arise from his personal politics. He was a member of the Mont Pelerin Society, founded by Hayek to promote classic liberalism and the free market

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Michael Shattock, Gareth Williams, and Miriam David for their comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> The student numbers quoted in this article refer to full-time students only. In line with the Robbins' Report's definition of full-time students, they include undergraduates and postgraduates, and home and international students for Great Britain, unless stated otherwise. 'Higher education students' refers to students attending universities, teacher training institutions, and further education establishments. For a discussion of part-time students and those in further education see article by Gareth Parry in this volume.

(Mirrowski and Dieter, 2009). However, as his recommendations testify, he was not opposed to state intervention or constrained by the doctrinaire neo-liberalism of Hayek as were some of his colleagues (Holmwood, 2010). The Robbins principle, as it has become known, ‘that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Robbins Report, para 31, p8) is a clear endorsement of a social democratic view of education. So too is the Report’s emphasis upon the public and social benefits of higher education. Taken together they acknowledge, following Marshall (1950), that liberal economic, civil and political rights need to be underpinned by social rights to ensure their realisation for all citizens. This suggests that Robbins can only be understood within the context of the development of the Welfare State and as a product of the post-war reconstruction or a continuation of that process – whereby social policy measures were being welded together into a coherent whole that could legitimately be referred to as the Welfare State.

The Robbins Report, therefore, is a product of its time in terms of the values and ideology informing the emerging Welfare State. Titmuss (1963) in his essay on ‘War and Social Policy’ discussed the concern with civilian morale during World War II and that the War could only be won if ordinary people were convinced that Britain had something better to offer than its enemies – not only during the war but after it too. He argues that this was a requirement of the war strategy. He quotes (p82) a leader in the *Times* newspaper around the time of the Dunkirk invasion which called for: social justice; the abolition of privilege; a more equitable distribution of income and wealth; and drastic changes in the economic and social life of the country. This captures some of the social goals underpinning the development of the Welfare State, which in turn influenced Robbins. Marshall (1975 p.82) similarly, points to the significance of ‘the experience of total war’ in shaping ‘the principles of social policy and the methods of social administration.’ The pooling of national resources and sharing of risks were guiding principles during the war and after the war too. ‘So the idea of the Welfare State came to be identified with the war aims of a nation fighting for its life’ (p83).

Support for the Welfare State was part of a broader ‘social democratic’ policy consensus, which included: the adoption of Keynesian economics; a commitment to full employment; and a high level of government intervention, expenditure, and planning. For the Conservative Party at the time, especially One Nation Tories, the Welfare State was a necessary part of economic and social cohesion. In contrast, for the Labour Party, the Welfare State was an essential ingredient in creating a fairer society and equal opportunities.

Robbins refers to the Welfare State, and specifically the 1944 Education Act, in the introduction to the Report. ‘Thus it has come about that, seventeen years after the passing of the great Education Act of 1944, which inaugurated momentous changes in the organisation of education in the schools, we have been asked to consider whether changes of a like order of magnitude are needed at a higher level.’ (Robbins Report, 1963: para 17 p. 5) Here Robbins is referring primarily to the organisation of higher education and the need for a ‘system of higher education’ (See article by Peter Scott in this edition). However, this quote clearly locates the Report within the context of the overall objective of the 1944 Act which put into effect the notion of ‘equality of opportunity’ by providing access to free secondary education for all, albeit still within a selective model that Turner (1960) suggests bore all the hallmarks of a ‘sponsored’ system.

The influence of the post-war welfare consensus is also very clear when examining Robbins’ aims of higher education. Robbins poses the question: ‘What purposes, what general *social* ends should be served by higher education?’ (Robbins Report, para 22, p 6 emphasis added). The Robbins Report identifies the following four public benefits of higher education: a skilled and educated workforce

(1963: para 25 p.6); promoting the general powers of the mind to produce cultivated men and women (1963: para 26 p. 6); securing the advancement of learning (1963: para 27 p. 7); and the transmission of a common culture and standards of citizenship (1963: para 28). The second and fourth aims describe a public interest in higher education that goes beyond the role of citizens as taxpayers and potential funders of it (Holmwood, 2010). The fourth aim is particularly significant because it helps highlight the difference between the thinking informing higher education policy in 1962/3 and the policy rhetoric of today.

‘the transmission of a common culture and standards of citizenship ...this ... is perhaps especially important in an age that has set for itself the ideal of equality of opportunity. It is not merely by providing places for students from all classes that this ideal will be achieved, but also by providing, in the atmosphere of the institutions in which the students live and work, influences that in some measure compensate for any inequalities of home background. These influences are not limited to the student population. Universities and colleges have an important role to play in the general cultural life of the communities in which they are situated.’ (Robbins Report, 1963: para 28, p 7)

As Holmwood (2010 p.4) has observed, ‘the fact that Robbins argued for the public funding of higher education as the culmination of a wider system of education that remained divided between publicly-funded and private education was itself a compensation against the inequalities of home background.’ However, this compensation continued to confront the inequality of access to higher education that such a divided system of secondary education helped maintain.

Today’s policy rhetoric, does acknowledge these public benefits or the wider benefits of learning arising from higher education. However, as will be discussed below, what steers policy today are the private individual financial benefits of higher education and a marketised system of higher education. Such an emphasis is explicitly rejected by Robbins. In contrast, it is these public benefits of higher education that drive Robbins’ recommendations and policies. They are the justification for the huge increase in public expenditure, the growth in student numbers, and the public funding of higher education: all of which reflect ideas rooted in the development of the Welfare State.

So the Robbins Report emerges in a period when the post-war aims of the Welfare State are still very strong and are not fundamentally being questioned: a period characterised by the expansion of the Welfare State financed through the public purse. The Report is a response to some of the successes of the new Welfare State and the 1944 Education Act. The expansion of secondary education and the rise in the proportion of young people staying on at school past the statutory leaving age had led to both a growth in the numbers of young people qualified to enter higher education and an increase in demand for higher education. However, the Report also is a response to some of the failures of the 1944 Education Act. Robbins vividly charts the lack of equal educational opportunities and the social class and gender inequalities in access to higher education. Hence, by 1962, the achievements of the post war aim of equality of educational opportunity is being questioned, implicitly in the Robbins Report, and explicitly by other government reports and sociologists of education.

There are several ways in which the Report questions these achievements. First, in its investigation of the factors influencing the demand for higher education and the very rigorous detailed analysis of the social class and gender differences in educational achievement and the ‘development of ability’, presented in Appendix 1 and 2 (b) of the Report. Essentially, Robbins documents the absence of equality of educational opportunities, the differences by social class and gender in school staying on rates, and the effects of local school provision on these opportunities. Moreover, the fact that an

entire chapter of the Report is devoted to schools shows the importance Robbins attributes to their development for higher education, and their significance for estimating higher education demand. In addition, this focus singles out the Robbins Report from later reports on higher education, such as the Dearing and Browne Reports, in terms of its emphasis on the links between schooling and higher education participation, which are so vital for understanding patterns of higher education participation.

Secondly, the Robbins Report, reflecting more general educational thinking at the time, as illustrated in the 1954 Early Leaving and 1959 Crowther Reports and to a lesser extent the 1963 Newsom Report, helps to crystallise an understanding of the barriers to realising equality of opportunity in higher education, and what today we might call 'the barriers to widening participation'. Centre stage in Robbins' analysis is the role of social class along with: young people's home background and circumstances; household income; parental factors including the level and type of their parents' education (public/private); and schools, in understanding the working classes' and girls' 'underachievement'. From an higher education widening participation perspective of today, the Report covers a large number of the issues impacting on inequality of access so prevalent in the current literature (Gorard *et al.* 2007).

Thirdly, the Robbins Report goes much further than just charting factors inhibiting participation (and hence the demand for higher education places). The Report's analysis explodes the myth that only a tiny minority of people are capable of benefiting from higher education and that access to higher education should be restricted. Robbins, like previous reports on schools, shows the wastage of talent and a large untapped pool of talent. Thus, the Report clearly asserts a belief that access to higher education is not determined by ability, but by social class.

Finally, the Report brings into question what is meant by ability. It helps shift dominant understandings at the time of what constituted individual capacity and the notion of fixed and measurable 'abilities'. Significantly, when the Report discusses who might be qualified to enter higher education, it refers to the '*so-called* pool of talent' (Robbins Report 1962: para 137, p 49 emphasis added). And Robbins goes further:

'It is sometimes argued that growth in the number of those able to benefit from higher education is something that is likely to be limited... by biological factors... But while it would be wrong to deny fundamental differences of nature, it is equally wrong to deny that performance in examinations or tests – or any measurable ability – is affected by nurture in the widest sense of that word. Moreover, the belief that there exists some easy method of ascertaining an intelligence factor unaffected by education or background is outmoded... performance in 'general intelligence tests' was thought to be relatively independent of earlier experiences. ..in fact it is dependent upon previous experience to a degree sufficiently large to be of great relevance.' (Robbins Report 1962: para 137, p 49)

The Robbins Report rejects biological determinism in estimating the growth in the number of those able to benefit from higher education. And it is worth recalling that both biological determinism and the notion of fixed measurable ability had informed both the tripartite system of secondary education and the introduction of the 11 + examination set up following the 1944 Education Act. Both ideas were being discredited by a flurry of sociological studies (e.g. Floud *et al.*, 1958; Jackson and Marsden, 1962) around the time of the Robbins Report, and their rejection helped usher in comprehensive secondary schooling and the issuing of circular 10/65 by the Labour government that

came into power in the summer of 1964.<sup>3</sup> Although Robbins was influenced by these ideas, they were not powerful enough for the Report to promote a non-selective system of higher education admissions in line with the thinking behind the abolition of the 11+ examination and the introduction of comprehensive schooling, or reflecting the ‘right of admission to higher education’ approach that existed in many Western European countries at the time of the Report whereby all school pupils who had passed the equivalent of A Levels could automatically get a place at university (e.g. in France). Ideologically, such an approach would have been unacceptable to Robbins and the Conservative Party who were in power at the time. Indeed, such a radical approach might lower quality - a concern already voiced in relation to higher education expansion. The Report did find that in 1961, 60 per cent of those with two passes at A levels entered full-time higher education and 15 per cent of those with no A level passes but with five or more passes at Ordinary level entered. It anticipated that these proportions would rise to 66% and 17% respectively by 1980/81 (Robbins Report 1963: para 161, p 63).<sup>4</sup>

Implicit in the Robbins Report was the assumption that with the right sort interventions, such as the expansion of higher education and adequate student financial support that the ‘barriers’ to equal opportunity in higher education, charted in the Report, could and would be abolished. This is a criticism that can be levelled not just at Robbins, but also the studies and official government reports on inequalities in schooling.

### **Robbins Report’s estimates of the demand for higher education places**

We now turn to examining the Robbins Report’s projections of the demand for higher education places. The Report rejected a manpower planning, or supply side, approach when estimating the future need for higher education places. Instead, it focused on the demand for places among suitably qualified young people. This involved investigating both demographic and educational trends which the Report did in Appendices 1 and 2. The Report projected that between 1961/62 and 1970/71 the number of full-time undergraduate and postgraduate student places (for home and international students) would need to rise from 216,000 to 344,000 (Robbins Report, Appendix 1 Table 53). In fact, by 1970/71, the actual number of such students enrolled was 457,000<sup>5</sup> far in excess of the Report’s projection (Table 1, columns 2-4). The Robbins Report had not anticipated reaching over 450,000 full-time places until 1976/77 (Robbins Report, Appendix 1 Table 53). Overall, Robbins underestimated the growth in full time higher education places between 1961/62 and 1970/71 by 33%, and by 55% for students at other institutions outside of universities (Table 1, columns 2-4) - a growth associated with the emergence of polytechnics following Crosland’s 1965 Woolwich speech, and the 1966 White Paper ‘*A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges: higher education in the further education system*’ (DES, 1966).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The reasons for the discrepancies between Robbins projections and the actual student numbers are various. According to an analysis of Robbins’ forecasts by Williams and Layard, published in 1971, the key factors driving the differences were related to firstly, an under-estimation of ‘the pool of

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<sup>3</sup> Note the Conservatives were not supportive of comprehensive schooling and David (1980) argues that it was for this reason that a circular to local education authorities was used rather than a change in the law.

<sup>4</sup> Today approximately 85% of those with 2 or more A Levels or equivalent enter HE

<sup>5</sup> My thanks go to the Higher Education Analysis section of the Department for Business, Industry and Skills (BIS) who provided these comparable data.

ability' and specifically the proportion of qualified school leavers - those with 2 or more A Levels. The Robbins Report (Appendix 1, Table 10) predicted that by 1970 9.8 per cent of school leavers would be qualified (12.6 percent of boys and 7 per cent of girls). Williams and Layard, quoting DES data, demonstrate that the proportion of qualified school leavers had reached this level by 1966. They also show that by 1968 the proportion was 11.8%, and was predicted to rise to 24.5% of the age group by 1980, while the Robbins Report estimated that the proportion would be 10.8% by 1980. Secondly, the Robbins forecasts were inaccurate because the Report's modelling assumed that since 1954 there had been a linear growth in demand for student places 'whereas in fact it was palpably steeper in the 1960s than the 1950s' (Williams and Layard, 1971 p. 22)

Table 1 (columns 5-7) also examines the Robbins Report's famous projection that by 1980/81 at least 558,000 full-time undergraduate and postgraduate higher education student places (for home and international students) would be needed, and compares this estimate with the actual number of 535,000 such students who had enrolled in that year. For 1980/81, the difference between Robbins' projection and the actual overall number of full-time higher education students is not very great - an over-estimation of just 23,000 places or 4 per cent. Robbins projections' did, however, over-estimate the number of university places and under-estimate the number of places at other institutions.

Thus the Robbins Report forecasts for 1980/81 did add up, but the Report's 1970/71 projections did not. The key reason for this was the differential rates of growth in student enrolment over each decade. Between 1962/63 and 1970/71, the actual rate of growth in full-time student numbers was much higher than between 1970/71 and 1980/81 (Table 2). Consequently, Robbins' 1980/81 figure is largely correct because of the slower than anticipated growth between 1970/71 and 1980/81 (62% projected compared with 17% actual), while the 1970/71 figure is incorrect due to faster than expected growth between 1962/63 and 1970/71 (59% projected compared to 112% actual).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

This relatively slow growth in the decade to 1980/81 can probably be attributed to the following factors. First, the oil crisis and the subsequent 1971-3 recession. The financial crisis exposed some of the underlying weaknesses of Keynesian social democracy and with it the post-war consensus. As Chitty (2009) argues 'The post-war 'welfare capitalist consensus' had relied on an increasing prosperity for any success it might have had in creating a semblance of social unity; and when that prosperity disintegrated, so, too, did the consensus.' (Chitty 2009:31-32). He suggests that the post-war consensus finally collapsed under the Wilson-Callaghan government of 1974-79 and with the election of the new Conservative government who ushered in a revised version of classical market liberalism of the nineteenth century with its idealised notion of the market. This development is particularly important for understanding the move away from the ideals originally informing the Robbins Report and subsequent developments in higher education policies.

Secondly, the 1971-3 recession also provided the rationale for economic cutbacks in education, including higher education. Within higher education there were the beginnings of a squeeze on the unit of resource primarily because of the very high levels of inflation, (although deep cuts in public expenditure did not really hit higher education until 1981 onwards). In addition, university salaries had failed to keep pace with public sector salaries in general which added to the pressures on resources. Significantly, student number targets were reduced by the University Grants Committee, following Treasury cut backs. In addition, the mechanism for funding universities changed. As Shattock (2012 p111) observes: 'For universities the oil crisis meant the abrogation of the quinquennial system, never to be revived, serious cuts in students number plans and capital

programmes, and a dependence for some years on annual allocations.’ Summarising the impact of the changes in public expenditure on higher education between 1972 and 1982, Shattock concludes:

‘From a position in the 1960s when a quinquennial approach seemed to guarantee continued expansion at a steady rate of funding and universities were encouraged in 1972 to submit ambitious plans up to 1977, on course to match the Robbins 1980 forecast, they were thrust into cut backs in numbers, disrupted building programmes, year by year uncertainties in funding and mounting salary inflation. From the high point of the Robbins predicated expansion they were plunged, only eight years later, into the 1981 UGC cuts’ (Shattock, 2012, p 11).

Thirdly, demand for higher education was probably dampened by the deterioration of the graduate labour market and rise of graduate unemployment in the 1970s, not just in the UK but elsewhere in Europe and the USA (Williams, 1985). Cyclical fluctuations in the demand for vocational subjects also impacted on graduate wages. Pissarides (1982) in his examination of the transition from school to university for British men between 1955 and 1978, showed how demand for higher education was depressed in the first half of the 1970s by the ratio of manual earnings to graduate earnings increasing faster than previously, and between 1975 and 1978 real permanent incomes increased at a slower rate than previously or decreased.

Finally, despite the essentially expansionist 1972 James Report on teacher education (see paper by David Watson in this edition), the following year the government issued circular 7/73 which made reference to a reduction in teacher training numbers. By 1975, this translated into the closure and merger of Teacher Training Colleges which may help explain the greater slow down in expansion among other institutions compared to universities. Between 1974 and 1979 the number of teachers in training in Britain fell by 50 per cent (Williams, 1985). These changes were related to both cuts in public expenditure and falling school rolls.

In addition, according to Willetts (2013), there are other factors contributing to the under-estimation of Robbins 1980/81 projections. The Robbins Report had made two key assumptions about the growth in demand for full-time higher education, neither of which was born out. First, it wrongly assumed a substantial proportion of the extra places by 1980/81 would be in science and technology. Secondly, it projected a large increase in the number of female students from 68,000 in 1962/3 to 253,000 in 1980/81 (Willetts, 2013, p. 26). Together these two assumptions required a large shift of young women entering university to study science and technology, which did not materialise.

### **Women and access to higher education**

The Robbins Report was enthusiastic about encouraging the growth of female higher education participation, although the Report’s views on women’s role in higher education were often narrowly drawn, and from today’s perspective, often patronising and sexist.

‘...our projections may not have allowed sufficiently for any increased tendency of children, and especially of girls, to stay on at school so as to seek entry to higher education.....we should greatly welcome a tendency for more girls to stay on at schools, if only from a national point of view of making better use of what must be the greatest source of unused talent at a time when there is an immediate shortage of teachers and many other types of qualified person.’ (Robbins Report, 1963: Para 170, p 66)



The proportion of women entering full-time higher education did increase after 1962/62 but not to the level expected by the Robbins Report (Willets, 2013). However, this growth was impressive especially because the proportion of full time female university (only) students had hardly changed between 1938/39 and 1962/63 (Robbins Report, Appendix 2 (a), Table 9, p 24). In 1962/63, a quarter of students in British universities were women; and in Training colleges in England and Wales two-thirds of students were women (Robbins Report, 1963: Para 50, p 17). Although the data are not strictly comparable, by 1980/81 around 40 per cent of full-time higher education students were women, by the late 1990s they formed the majority, and by 2011/12 54 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

However, today, just as in 1962/3 there is a clear gender segregation in terms of the subjects women and men study full-time at university (Table 3). Women were under-represented in science and especially applied science in 1962/63, and remain so today, outside of medical subjects and biological sciences. As Table 3 demonstrates, gender segregation by subject of study remains entrenched, and arguably is becoming more so. For instance, in 1961/62, 42 per cent of humanities students and 23 per cent of students reading social sciences were women. The equivalent proportions in 2011/12 were 62 per cent and 57 per cent respectively.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Indeed, some have argued that both the 1944 Education Act and Robbins addressed the problem of class, not gender, bias in education (Jones and Castle, 1986). They recommended that wider opportunities for all, which while not removing class divisions, improved the chances of greater numbers of working class boys and middle class girls entering higher education but not the chances of working class girls.

### **Social class and access to higher education**

As suggested, central to the Robbins Report's analysis of higher education participation, the number of qualified school leavers, and the demand for places was social class. The report asserts that children's educational progress is affected by their family background and that the likelihood of a young person entering higher education is closely associated with their parents' level of education and their father's occupation.

According to the Robbins Report, in 1961/62 around 29 per cent of full-time home undergraduates at university came from families where one or both parents had a higher education qualification and the proportion was higher for women (34%) than for men (27%) (Robbins Report: Appendix 2 (b) Table 2 p 2) – suggesting that middle class women were more likely to benefit from higher education. Although the figures are not strictly comparable, according to the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, in 2010, the proportion of 19 year olds in higher education continue to vary by their parental education. Young people whose parents had a degree were more likely to be in higher education (68%) than those with parents educated below A Level (28%) (DfE/NS, 2011, Chart 2.1.2 p17). However, the proportion of all 19 year olds attending higher education who had a parent with a degree was lower in 2010 at 22 per cent, than the proportion in 1962/3.<sup>7</sup>

The Robbins Report also examined full-time university participation by the occupation of students' fathers. This is just one of many ways in which social class can be defined: social class was, and

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<sup>6</sup> Data provided by BIS

<sup>7</sup> Author's calculations from based on Table 2.1.4 DfE/NS, 2011.

remains, a contested concept and definitions change over time. Robbins found little change between 1928 and 1961 in the proportion of full-time home university undergraduates with fathers in manual occupations with around 25 per cent of undergraduates coming from such working class backgrounds (a term Robbins uses) (Robbins Report: Append 2 b Table 6 p5).<sup>8</sup> So by 1961/62, 71% of full-time home university undergraduates came from families of non-manual backgrounds, and of these 59% were from professional and managerial groups, while a quarter of undergraduates came from families where the father had a manual occupation (Append 2 b Table 5 p 4).

As suggested, definitions of social class have changed over time as have occupational classifications including those jobs defined as manual and non-manual. So while not strictly comparable, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England shows that 45 per cent of all 19 year olds attending higher education in 2010 had parents with higher or lower professional occupations, 19 per cent intermediate jobs, 8 per cent lower supervisory and 17 per cent routine jobs (DfE/NS, 2011).<sup>9</sup> Recent survey data of a nationally representative group of undergraduates shows that in 2010/11 – 53% of full-time students in England were classified as belonging to the managerial or professional socio-economic group and 27% belonged to the routine or manual socio-economic group (Pollard et al, 2013).

So higher education participation rates by social class may have improved since Robbins but there remains a large social class gap in entry rates. Indeed, this gap has widened over time because the participation rates of students from richer families have increased to a greater extent than those from low-income families (HEFCE, 2013). Thus, the relative chances of going to university for a poorer student have actually worsened over time (Vignoles, 2013). A succession of studies has confirmed this lack of progress and the deep-seated and multi-faceted problems associated with these inequalities (e.g. Burke, 2012; Chowdry *et al*, 2012; Boliver, 2011). In addition, lower class students (and some minority ethnic groups) are under-represented at selective higher education institutions (Boliver, 2013; Harris, 2010) and little progress has been made in tackling this inequality. Indeed, overtime there has been an increase in relative selectivity. Therefore, the massive expansion of higher education following Robbins and beyond, which was intended to ensure that opportunities for higher education would be spread more representatively across the population, especially among the working classes, has been only a partial success. It remains the case, as the Robbins Report argued, that a young person's family background is the biggest predictor of whether or not they enter university, and which university they attend.

A legacy of the Robbins Report is the way it established social class as a causal factor in higher education participation in the minds of policy makers and higher education researchers. This was a positive step forwards in describing the obvious inequalities in participation described by the Report. As Vignoles (2013) and others argue, social class differences in higher education participation are formed primarily during school and even earlier in individual's lives. This suggests examining more closely the literature around class and school outcomes, which is in fact what Robbins began to do. And we need a better understanding of why seemingly similar individuals do and do not participate in higher education, and when they do participate, why seemingly similar individuals do and do not go to the most prestigious and selective universities.

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<sup>8</sup> However, the proportion of girls from working classes backgrounds had risen from 13% in 1927 to 23% in 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Author's calculations from based on Table 2.1.4 DfE/NS, 2011

## Student tuition fees and funding

In the concluding part of this article, we turn to the Robbins Report's discussion of tuition fees and student financial support. The question of who should pay for the massive expansion in higher education proposed by Robbins gets little attention in the Report. Michael Shattock in this edition discusses in more depth Robbins' cavalier attitude to costs. However, from the mindset of the Robbins Committee, the reason for this is perhaps obvious. As argued earlier, the Robbins Report is a child of the Welfare State, and is concerned primarily with the public benefits of higher education. Consequently, both the costs of expansion and financial support for students were to be met by the public purse, by the taxpayer.<sup>10</sup> It is only with hindsight, and from the perspective of today's neo-liberal agenda of a marketised system of higher education with tuition fees and student loans firmly embedded in England's higher education policy, that we question this, and indeed are amazed by the boldness of the Robbins Report in terms of its implications for public expenditure.

The following extract from the Robbins Report summaries its approach to higher education as an investment. It clearly recognises that there are both private financial and social returns to higher education: that both individuals and society as a whole benefit from an investment in higher education. However, for Robbins what mattered were the social returns to higher education – the benefits to society - rather than the individual private financial returns, as measured by the higher earnings of graduates. This marked 'the difference between a tribe of savages and a civilised community.' This emphasis on the public benefits of higher education is the vital clue to Robbins' presumption that higher education expansion would be paid for out of the public purse. It is used to justify public investment in higher education, and the funding of higher education and student financial support through public expenditure.

'Education...furnishes perhaps the most conspicuous example of the importance in social analysis of the difference between what economists call the 'private' and 'social' net product of investment...The difference, as regards economic potential between a tribe of savages and a civilised community depends more on education than on material equipment... Any attempt, therefore, to confine the conception of the return on educational investment to that which is measured by earnings differentials is bound to be incomplete and runs the danger of being seriously misleading...If investment in higher education were seriously contracted, there would be a danger of a loss to the economy far greater than the measurable loss of the sum of the individual investments concerned.'(Robbins Report, 1963: para 625 p 205)

What have shifted since the Robbins Report are ideas about the social purpose of higher education, who benefits, and who pays for higher education, and with that, the balance of public and private contributions to higher education. These changes are linked to the enormous expansion of higher education with the move from an elite system of higher education to a mass system and then a universal one (Trow, 1973). As Trow asserts, the problems of higher education are problems associated with growth, including how to finance such an enlarged system. However, more significantly, the shifts are associated with economic, political and ideological changes and in particular, the end of the post-war consensus about the Welfare State and Conservative Party thinking under Thatcher onwards.

For Robbins the key beneficiaries of higher education was society, today individual students are considered the main beneficiaries of higher education. Currently, the private financial benefits of higher education are valorised in policy at the expense of the public benefits which in turn justifies

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<sup>10</sup> This still remains largely the case in those countries which emphasise the public benefits of higher education.

reduced public expenditure and greater private contributions from individual students and/or their families. Students' higher earnings on graduation underpin the current student loans.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as we will see, elsewhere in the Report, Robbins specifically rejects higher graduate earnings as a rationale for investing in higher education, and questions the extent and nature of the private returns of higher education.

The Robbins Report was clear that higher education should not be confined to those that can afford it – and an important social objective was to ensure that the lack of funding did not inhibit access. However, issues about student funding and student grants to facilitate access, had largely been covered by the 1960 Anderson Report on *Grants to Students* (Ministry for Education/Scottish Education Department, 1960), implemented in 1962, which recommended mandatory grants for living costs and tuition fees for full-time, first-time UK undergraduate students. And the introduction of the Anderson Report's recommendations was another reason why the Robbins Report did not discuss student funding in any depth.

The Robbins Report quickly dismissed the idea that students should pay for their tuition fees. While the Report regretted that universities' fee income had declined over time, it recognised that most students' fees were paid for by their local authority through the new mandatory grants, and thus via public expenditure. In addition, it rejected 'the raising of fees until they cover, if not all, at least a large percentage of the costs of the various institutions, concerned.' (Robbins Report, 1963: para 653, p 213). So the Report recommended 'that the level of fees be revised so that in future they meet at least 20 per cent of current institutional expenditure.' (Robbins Report, 1963: para 654, p 214).

At the time of the Robbins Report, some higher education students with financial difficulties did receive loans. The Report discussed whether students in general should be financed either wholly or partly by loans rather than grants. The Report outlined three advantages to student loans, and by implication, the disadvantages of grants. First, loans were cheaper than grants for government, and thus a means of keeping down the higher education budget. Secondly, there was an argument about 'the distribution of burden' (Robbins Report 1963: para 642 p.210). Grants meant that those from lower income households who did not reap the financial returns of higher education subsidised those that did benefit financially from going to university. However, loans, paid for by higher education beneficiaries, did not privilege an already privileged group. In other words, why should the dustman pay for Prince Charles' university education? In essence, public subsidies such as grants redistributed wealth from people who are less well off to those who are better-off.

Thirdly, the Report marshalled an argument about 'morals and incentive' (Robbins Report 1963: para 643 p.211), based on the idea that one takes more responsibility for something when one pays for it. Grants recipients may take their financial support for granted and so 'lack a sense of obligation of the need to work' while loans produce 'a greater sense of individual responsibility' (Robbins Report 1963: para 643 p.211). (This argument was used later in the 1988 White Paper *Top-Up Loans for Students* (DES 1988), which led to the introduction of loans for maintenance in 1990. Amongst other things, the government argued that student loans would promote a sense of self-reliance and responsibility, and would increase students' economic awareness of the costs of their education and thus change their behaviour (Callender, forthcoming)).

The Robbins Report identified two arguments against loans. First, that

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<sup>11</sup> The first UK scheme of government-funded student loans was introduced by the Thatcher government by their 1990 *Education (Student Loans) Act*. These loans were to help pay for their living costs and at the same time the value of grants were frozen.

‘the connection between higher education and individual earning power can be over-stressed. Not all forms of higher education produce a large earnings differential and, as higher education spreads, such differentials may tend to diminish’ (Robbins Report 1963: para 644 p.211).

In addition, the Report, in line with what it saw as the prime purposes of higher education, argued that the

‘social advantages of investment in higher education may vastly exceed the commercial return; and to apply to higher education in general criteria of capacity to repay that only apply, and that only partially, in certain parts of the field is to risk as much injustice as the grant system is liable to create’ (Robbins Report 1963: para 644 p.211).

These criticisms of loans and the graduate earning premium still apply today, although it should be noted that the wage differentials between graduates and non-graduates in 1962 would have been far smaller than they are today. Even so, currently graduate earnings are in decline (Elias and Purcell, 2013); there are significant data and methodological problems and limitations in calculating the financial returns to higher education and often the modelling does not compare like with like - those who go to university and those who do not have very different characteristics (Thompson, 2012); the terminology and measures used vary; the higher financial returns of higher education recorded for female graduates than male graduates are a function of non-graduate women’s concentration in very poorly paid part-time jobs; most calculations of the graduate premium suffer from the tyranny of averages, with the figures reported being the average effect of a degree on earnings and the probability of employment; variations in graduate earnings by subject of study may be related to the subject, or due to differences in the students studying different subjects – the causal direction is unknown (Walker and Zhu, 2013); and such calculations of the private returns to higher education purely focus on the financial returns and ignore the wider social benefits of higher education.

The second disadvantage of student loans, according to the Robbins Report, was debt aversion which may deter higher education participation.

‘It is a bad thing, ... for young people to emerge from the process of education with a load of debt. [and] might tend to diminish the supply of talent coming forward and so lead to a social loss out-balancing any gain in apparent justice. ... where women are concerned, the effect might well be either that British parents would be strengthened in their age-long disinclination to consider their daughters to be as deserving of HE as their sons, or that the eligibility for marriage of the more educated would be diminished by the addition to their charms of what would be in effect a negative dowry.’ (Robbins Report 1963: para 645, p 211).

So loans may render women unattractive in the marriage market. The Report continues:

‘anything tending to make talented young people less willing to enter higher education would involve social loss. .... At a time when many parents are only just beginning to acquire the habit of contemplating higher education for such of their children, especially girls, as are capable of benefiting by it, we think it probable that it would have undesirable disincentive effects.’ (Robbins Report 1963: para 647, p 212).

Again these arguments about debt aversion still apply today with research suggesting that students from low-income families are more debt averse than those from more affluent backgrounds and that this inhibits their participation in higher education (Callender and Jackson, 2005).

However, Robbins also suggests that once higher education participation has increased and ‘the habit [of higher education] is more firmly established’ (Robbins Report 1963: para 647, p 212) loans might be an option in the future. Indeed, Robbins later argued for the introduction of loans (Robbins, 1980).

To conclude, essentially the Robbins Report’s arguments for and against loans were about equity and efficiency – and in 1962 the case for equity won out because of the predominant values at the time associated with the Welfare State. Today, the focus is on efficiency in a universal system of higher education. As suggested, with the gradual hollowing out of the Welfare State from the 1980s onwards, ideas and beliefs have changed about the role of higher education, who benefits from higher education, and who should pay. And with this, so have students’ reasons for going to university altered, with a far greater focus on qualifications, employment outcomes, earnings and financial returns, rather than a desire to promote the general powers of the mind or to become a good citizen. As Hillman has commented in charting the development of student loans and student financial support, the ‘discourse about higher education became less associated with the welfare state and more associated with human capital’ (Hillman, 2013 p 263). Similarly, Carpentier (2012 p. 367) argues that ‘cyclical fluctuations in public funding in higher education may be connected to the development of the welfare state and its crisis.’

In terms of higher education policy and policy rhetoric, the focus moved from the public and social benefits of higher education to an emphasis on markets and the private individual financial benefits of higher education. This is what underpins today’s student funding policies despite the fact that the social benefits of higher education to the government are very large. They are larger than the private returns to higher education and are ‘far in excess of likely exchequer costs’ (Walker and Zhu, 2013 p 5) (despite or possibly because of massification). And with these ideological swings and changes in foci, we see cuts in public expenditure on higher education, more cost-sharing, and individual students rather than the taxpayer shouldering an increasing proportion of the cost of their higher education – as it is students/graduates who are considered the key beneficiaries of higher education. Yet still there are inequalities in access to these benefits, and still a student’s family background is the biggest predictor of higher education participation and the patterns of participation.

Despite these shifts, we must thank the Robbins Report for its vision; for putting social class on the agenda in terms of understanding inequalities in access to higher education - that class not ability determined access; and for exploding the myth that only a minority can benefit from higher education.

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