

The Dearing Report: paving the way for a learning society

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Introduction

While the higher education systems in Australia and the United Kingdom have both been the subject of continuous change in recent years, the West and Dearing Reviews guarantee further radical shifts in the way the two systems are geared up for the twenty-first century. As the West Review enters its concluding stages, it may be useful to look at the Dearing Report and its reception in the UK.

The Dearing Report on higher education in the United Kingdom, "Higher Education in the Learning Society", published in July 1997, is as ambitious in scope as the title suggests. The Report's vital statistics, 1700 pages, weighing in at 6 kilos and with 93 recommendations, add to this sense of comprehensiveness and authority. Although the Chairman of the Review Committee, Sir Ron Dearing, favours regular reviews of this kind, this is the first major review of higher education since Robbins (1963), and it is hard to envisage another such thoroughgoing review process for at least another twenty years.

Dearing was very conscious of the international context in which it was working, and referred to the need to keep up with international competitors' higher education participation levels, specifically the USA and Japan. Committee members visited Australia, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the USA to collect comparative evidence.

British and Australian governments' higher education policies have continued to develop in a number of respects in parallel, although arguably Australian policy is open to a wider range of external influences (from the USA and the Pacific region, for example) than the UK. There is an ironic twist to these parallel policy developments, in that the national governments in the two countries have usually been of opposite political persuasions - which, in the late twentieth century political climate, has proved no obstacle to learning from one another. The Australian Labor Government's student loans policy informed the British Conservatives' thinking in this field. With a 'New Labour' government now in the UK, and a conservative minister in Canberra awaiting delivery of the West Review, it may be that the education unions in Australia can use aspects of the Dearing Report to protect and develop higher education and promote

lifelong learning in an inimical political climate. In this context, it is worth noting that the Dearing Review was set up by the Major Government with the support of the other two main parties, and the Report has received a wide degree of support in principle, if not always on key details, from across the political spectrum.

Dearing in context

Dearing was set up to help bring order to a higher education system which has achieved phenomenal and accelerating growth over a thirty year period, largely in response to 'market forces' and, in spite of two major pieces of legislation in the last ten years, without a clear perception of what this growth meant for the system. However, it was clear that growth without fundamental change was unsustainable in terms of finance, capacity, quality, the character of the offer made to potential students, and relations with other sectors of education. Dearing has addressed all these questions more or less successfully.

In Dearing, as in the West Review, questions are posed about the relationship between higher education and vocational or further education (and, explicitly in Dearing, lifelong learning). The dynamic between further and higher education will be of still greater significance in future - but also, the dynamics within higher education, between 'elite' or 'research' universities and primarily teaching institutions, are potentially explosive, and Dearing's attempt to meet everyone's wishes may prove over-optimistic.

Sir Ron Dearing was the former Conservative Governments' educational problem solver, but he was squarely in the middle of the political spectrum; he and his team have produced a report which has attracted wide political support. However, there are internal contradictions and inconsistencies between the planned greater equity and access and the Committee's (and the Government's) financial proposals. A few weeks before the publication of Dearing, another significant report, produced by a Committee chaired by Helena Kennedy QC, forcefully argued for greater equity in the further education system, including access to educational opportunity beyond compulsory schooling for those who currently do not gain access to it, backed by the necessary funding. It is

rumoured that only behind-the-scenes diplomacy between the two Committees headed 'Kennedy' off from recommending explicitly that its proposals should be funded at the expense of higher education.

NATFHE, representing teachers across the further and higher education spectrum, rejects this "either-or" approach: the continuous and lifelong character of education in a modern industrialised state is becoming quite clear. The distinctions between 'further' and 'higher' education are eroding, and many who succeed in further education will aspire to higher education in the future. We argue strongly for a holistic approach which builds a coherent, compatible and mutually supportive further and higher education system aiming at lifelong learning for all our citizens, in forms appropriate to their needs. We believe that the Governments' response to Dearing and to Kennedy must be broad based and visionary, and not driven by the need for quick fixes to the immediate funding crisis, urgent though that is.

The Report's key recommendations

Much of the UK debate, before and after the publication of Dearing, focused on the issues of student support and student contributions to the funding of higher education. That issue has overshadowed a number of other aspects of the Report, including those with far-reaching implications for higher education personnel. I would like to explore some of these aspects before coming back to the student finance question.

Two of the most significant elements of Dearing for higher education teachers are the proposals for accreditation of teachers, and for an independent pay review committee. Dearing has recognised the significance of the shift of higher education work more specifically to teaching in the context of wider changes in education which are re-asserting the professional responsibility of teachers - and the need for continuing professional development. The Committee proposes a new Institute for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and recommends that, for all new entrants to higher education teaching, successful completion of probation should require achievement of a basic (associate) level of membership of the Institute. This would create a climate in which professional development would become the norm, but not be compulsory. If implemented, this would be a radical departure, but it would go a long way, with the other proposals, towards redressing the current imbalance between the status of teaching and of research in higher education. On the other hand, the Report is cautiously supportive of the increased use of short-term and part-time staff, not apparently recognising the difficulty of involving them in formal professional development.

After summarising the different views submitted in evidence on collective bargaining structures, the Committee recognised that this was an issue which it could

not adequately address. Therefore it recommended an independent review committee to be set up by employers, including 'staff representatives' and a Chairman nominated by the Government, to report on the framework for determining pay and conditions of service by April 1998. Dearing also recommends that instead of the present different pension schemes resulting from the mergers of the new and old university sectors there should be progressive inclusion of all academic staff in a single scheme. It is noteworthy that although the report focuses overwhelmingly on academic staff in its discussion of the workforce in higher education, it does say "in the future the contribution that all staff make to the quality of the student experience will need to be recognised and rewarded, and effective, sensitive, management strategies adopted to achieve the changes we anticipate". (14.59)

The Report's proposals would further strengthen the role of teaching compared to research, and reflect the reality that many university departments bid for research funding which they are unlikely to get: it is recommended that some departments might be encouraged to opt out of the Research Assessment Exercise, which forms the basis for a major part of research funding, and could then receive a per capita grant to fund scholarship in support of the teaching function. While this could support many academic staff in their teaching functions, it could push the system towards an unwelcome degree of selectivity in research funding, and could promote a divide between "research and teaching" and "teaching only" staff. In addition, it is recommended that new funding and low interest loans for research projects and equipment are made available, together with a new arts and humanities research council with enhanced funding. The Report expresses strong concern about the research infrastructure and funding levels. While noting the diversity of funding agencies for research, from charities through to the European Union, it places the responsibility on the Government to resolve these problems. The Report also emphatically rejects the idea of 'teaching only' institutions, reflecting the opinions the Committee gathered that "such an institution would simply not be a 'university' in any legitimate use of that term" (11.60). One weakness of the Report is that, in the field of research as elsewhere, it recognises the importance of the industrial sector's contribution and proposes bridges which might be built from the institutions to industry, but it is insufficiently explicit about the actual responsibilities of businesses.

The Committee made some useful recommendations on the governance of institutions building on the work of the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life (set up by the Major Government to defuse the numerous cases of corruption in public life in the early 1990s). Dearing's recommendations include the strengthening of staff and student representation on institutional Gov-

erning bodies, and protection for so-called “whistle-blowers”.

The Report’s emphasis on the need to sustain the link between scholarship and teaching in higher education is welcome, and can play an important part in promoting quality in an increasingly diverse system. Dearing proposes a number of other approaches to quality protection, including a new UK wide framework of higher education qualifications at eight levels from sub-degree to doctoral level, linked to credit points and with clearer use of qualifications titles. The Report also recommends a number of tasks for the newly consolidated Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Two of these tasks are of particular significance. The Committee was impressed by the progress made in Australia over the last ten years to establish an academic standards programme leading to a national approach to standards (10.61, 10.62) and recommends the QAA be given a similar role. Secondly, a more pro-active role in respect of franchised courses is envisaged for the QAA, to ensure that higher education courses franchised to higher education are of an acceptable standard. ‘Serial Franchising’ would be outlawed, so that franchisees have only one higher education partner. (The Report does not address the widespread concern that franchising higher education institutions sometimes ‘top slice’ the funding of franchised courses to an extent which may jeopardise the capacity of the franchisee institutions to deliver a quality product).

Interestingly, the Report refers to the past work of the Higher Education Quality Council (to be subsumed by the QAA) on the auditing of collaborative provision in the UK and overseas. The Report says:

...as far as we are aware, the UK is the only country that conducts audits of its international collaborative provision. More must be made of this as a positive point for UK higher education internationally. (10.78).

The Report envisages significant increases in all forms of international collaboration, particularly through communications technology.

Obviously franchising is a key element in the extended regional and local role of higher education institutions envisaged in the Report. Inter-institutional collaboration between higher education institutions themselves will also be a key point of the Dearing model, whether for research and scholarship, the sharing of expensive equipment or the development of joint teaching programmes. Dearing also places great importance on the role of higher education institutions in local economies and labour markets, including attracting inward investment.

The Report’s references to lifelong learning, access and community development are particularly welcome to NATFHE, which represents the new universities and higher education colleges which have traditionally promoted those threads within higher education provision.

It is a pity that, this chapter of the Report lacks concrete proposals. Its weak position on part-time students is particularly disappointing; for example, while “attracted” to the idea of equitable treatment between full-time and part-time student fees (17.53), the Committee apparently felt unable to make this a formal recommendation, although some of its proposals relating to the social security system would help part-time students. This is inadequate, given that future growth in higher education, particularly lifelong learning, will largely be through a great increase in part-time study.

Finance

Unlike the Robbins Report in 1963, which was largely driven by the post-war demographic boom, Dearing’s key preoccupation is finance. The Report quotes the forecast by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that, by 1999/2000, seventy eight institutions in England (55% of the total) would be in financial deficit. Severe redundancies to meet the financial cuts of 6.5% required over the next 2 years are already in progress. (17.3). Against this background, the Dearing proposals on the student contribution to higher education, and on student financial support, were the subject of considerable prior speculation. In the event, the Government pre-empted Dearing by producing firm proposals of its own a week before publication of the Report : while accepting the broad principle of a student contribution to higher education funding, Education Secretary David Blunkett sought to mitigate the effects of its application by replacing the flat £1000 fee proposed by Dearing with a means tested fee, and replacing Dearing’s recommended mix of grants and loans with a loan system (with income - contingent repayments), and with some improved safeguards for the poorest students.

Public reaction to these proposals has been more mild than it would have been a few years ago. There is widespread acceptance that there must now be more fundamental change, including a new look at how students are funded and the new assumption that they will contribute to the costs of their higher education. Dearing reflects the Government’s own view, and the often reluctant acceptance by many higher education bodies, that students have to contribute more. This is the policy of both Labour and Conservative parties and, in the debate on the Kennedy Report, the relatively ‘privileged’ treatment of higher education students compared to further and continuing education students has been highlighted. However, given that the proposals will heavily hit middle class voters, and further disadvantage working class students, Prime Minister Blair can hardly see the measures as a voter-winner, and may be hoping that, by hurrying them forward, the dust will have settled before the next General Election. Many fear that in future years the £1000 ceiling on students’ contribution to fees will ratchet upwards once the principle has been con-

ceded. Also there are doubts, exacerbated by leaks of Government plans, about whether the fees paid through the tax system once graduates' earnings are sufficient will find their way back into higher education. In a further controversial move, the Government is seeking to sell off student debt incurred under the present arrangements, to give a £3 billion boost to the system.

At least Dearing and the Government have rejected for the present the proposals for top-up fees to be levied by certain elite universities, which those institutions had put forward. As far as the Government's proposals are concerned, there is considerable anxiety in the system about both the principle and the impact of the new arrangements which will come into effect in 1998: they have already resulted in a rush by students to get onto courses before the fees policy is introduced. This will possibly lead to 50,000 would-be entrants without places in October, and the Government making some limited concession to stem the outcry and real sense of unfairness about such a quick introduction of the new system.

These decisions by the Government are likely to prove the most difficult and indigestible of the (in this case indirect) outcomes from Dearing. However, Dearing itself recognised the chronic under-funding of higher education, and the need for long term solutions firmly based in the public sector. Again, it is disappointing that the Committee did not extend its recognition of the concrete benefits of higher education to employers to requiring them to meet more of the bill, and to support students' financial costs.

The Government intends to set out its proposals in detail in a White Paper on Lifelong Learning in November. The current indications from the expert advisory group preparing the ground for the White Paper are that it will seek to further redress the balance between further and higher education in favour of increased access and intermediate level studies.

The Union response

The unions in higher education have generally reacted positively to Dearing, although with reservations about the proposals for student contributions to funding and for student support. Unions in this sector, and the trade union movement as a whole, have learnt quickly not to expect many favours from the Blair Government. However, the blatant and aggressive hostility of the Thatcher/Major years has gone, and if the unions have a contribution to make, ministers are willing to listen.

Dearing provides the basis for joint action with the Government and employers in a number of key areas. It would be nonsensical for Government to try to proceed on either accreditation of higher education teachers or the review of salaries without close teacher union involvement. A strong case can and is being made for

participation in the work on governance and management, quality, and other areas where the teachers have a key role. In the UK, and in Europe as a whole, unions are formally "Social Partners": the other key Social Partners, the employers, have been given disappointingly few responsibilities by Dearing, particularly given the financial gap which needs to be plugged. One of the biggest and least tangible aspects which the teachers' unions must engage is the shift in the culture of post-school education. "The Learning Society" was already in danger of becoming a vacuous cliché when Dearing borrowed it - it is to be hoped that the Report now gives the UK system the impetus to create a genuine Learning Society. Teachers and their representative organisations must grasp the opportunity to shape the new system, and to ensure that our members are able to make the most of it. For many teachers, this will mean a significant change of role, with the trend over recent years away from conventional teaching to a diverse range of activities within the teaching/learning process. For many teachers, this will be a difficult challenge: for their unions, it will also mean a new range of industrial relations and professional tasks.

The Dearing Report has vindicated many of the arguments which the staff unions in higher education have made during the long Thatcher/Major years. In particular, it had important things to say on funding levels, access and lifelong learning, accountability and academic freedom. However, the new funding regime which the Government has put in place on the back of Dearing is highly controversial in the UK context, and will be judged by its effects on would-be students' choices, and its effects on access and equal opportunity. On some key areas, like the responsibilities of business and employers, and a better deal for part-time students, the Report says the right thing, but then pulls its punches. The proposal for a one-off review of pay reflects a sub-text of the whole Report, which recognises the importance of staff, and the fact that their salaries have fallen behind those of staff in comparable industries. Teachers' unions may be forgiven for believing this is of great importance for the acceptance of the Dearing proposals as a whole. It is now for the unions, in the universities and colleges, to carry forward the debate on all the issues raised by Dearing and shift that debate from rhetoric to reality.

Selective reading list

Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (The Dearing Report). July 1997 HMSO, Norwich UK.

Report of the Widening Participation Committee of the Further Education Funding Council, *Learning Works*. (The Kennedy Report) July 1997 FEFC, Coventry UK.

NATFHE evidence to the Nolan Inquiry, November 1996 NATFHE, London.

NATFHE *Building a Learning Society* 1996 NATFHE, London.