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Title	Realising the Learnig Society:Widening Access to Higher Education in the United Kingdom
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Citation	北海道大學教育學部紀要, 80, 25-40
Issue Date	2000-03
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/29605
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	80_P25-40.pdf

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Realising the Learning Society: Widening Access to Higher Education in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT *This article describes and analyses the recent process of policy formulation and implementation in the United Kingdom aimed at widening access to higher education. This process began with the establishment of the Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education and includes the publication of its report - The Dearing Report - ; the Governments response to this - The Learning Age - ; and the subsequent actions of the funding councils and universities.*

[要旨] ロジャー・エリス，学習社会の実現：イギリスにおける高等教育機会の拡大。
本稿は，高等教育を受ける機会の拡大を目指した，イギリスにおける政策立案と実行の近年の経過を記述し分析する。この過程は，高等教育調査委員会の設置に始まり，その委員会報告書 —「デアリング・リポート」— の発表，及びこれに対する政府の回答 —「ラーニング・エイジ」— を経て，その後の，財源配分審議会と大学側の行動へと続く。

Higher Education is a major activity in every developed country. It is believed to contribute significantly not only to the personal development of those who enter it but also to the economic, social and cultural development of the society of which it is a part (Reich, 1992). However it is an expensive business and its funding is a world-wide problem. While the sources and quantity of funding for Higher Education vary, there is always a substantial contribution from the state (Sabloff, 1997).

There are a number of stakeholders in Higher Education including students, families, employers, and government not to mention faculty and other university staff. Hardly surprisingly, therefore, there is a fairly constant debate concerning the purpose and value of Higher Education and the funding it needs (AGB, 1996). But from time to time this debate reaches a particular intensity. There is a period of heightened critical awareness regarding Higher Education usually precipitated by a perceived crisis of some sort (Fitzgerald, 1996). The results of such reviews are often encapsulated in a significant government report. This paper will describe and analyse such a period in the history of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. In particular, it will focus on the desirability and feasibility of widening access and participation in Higher Education.

The last four years in the United Kingdom have seen unusually intense government activity with respect to Higher Education. The period makes a fascinating case study of policy formulation, political pressure and changing practice. The period probably repre-

sents the final and most significant phase in the transformation of Higher Education in the United Kingdom from an elite to a mass system (Fitzgerald, 1996). In some ways these developments mirror those which have already occurred in the United States (Rudolph, 1990). In other ways the strategy and approach is distinctive and there are lessons to be learned even in the United States.

By 1995, Higher Education in the United Kingdom was described by many commentators and certainly perceived by its participants as being in a state of crisis (Warwick, 1995). Since the 1960s, when the last major report, The Robbins Report (Dearing, 1997), had recommended that Higher Education should be open to all who could benefit from it, student numbers and participation rates had risen dramatically. In 1963, one in ten eighteen year olds entered Universities at the age of 18 (THES, 1996). By 1993, participation rates were approaching one in three. At least as many mature students entered Higher Education either for the first time or as part of their lifelong learning. At the same time the unit of resource had dropped by 40% (THES, 1996). Universities were being asked by their funders to do more with less. There was abundant evidence of overload on the system (THES, 1996). Classes grew larger by the year; laboratories were falling further behind recognised benchmarks (THES, 1996).

The transformation of 50 Polytechnics into Universities in 1991 bringing the total number of Universities to 104 did nothing to improve the situation (UCAS, 1999). Indeed the generally higher student-staff ratios and inferior accommodation (reflecting lower unit costs) of the Polytechnics compared with established Universities were seen as dragging standards even lower. At the same time there was no sign of a reduction in demand. Not only were more 18 year olds wanting to enter Universities but there was also an increase in mature students, part time students and those committed to life long learning and regular return to school (UCAS, 1999).

The then Conservative government, unable to find extra money and cater for this burgeoning demand, decided that a Committee of Enquiry was not only desirable but also politically expedient. With the approval of the then Labour opposition, a Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education was established under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing, a well-known government trouble-shooter (THES, 1997). The Committee was to undertake a comprehensive review of Higher Education and make recommendations on how the purpose, shape, structure, size and funding of Higher Education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next twenty years, recognising that Higher Education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research (THES, 1997). This was then a bipartisan initiative with both government and opposition recognising the importance of the problem. This was just as well since the receipt of the report and the implementation of its recommendations fell to the new Labour

government.

The Committee of Enquiry was made up, in equal parts, of distinguished persons, from within and outside Higher Education. Vice Chancellors (United Kingdom equivalent of Presidents) and professorial experts were matched with captains of industry and public servants. The Committee was asked to report by the summer of 1997 and this they did, and at length (Dearing 1997). The Dearing Report, as it quickly became known, runs to 1700 pages of text (1997). It is available as a full report or as a summary report and there are a number of volumes of evidence and argument. The complete report,'Higher Education in the Learning Society' comes in a substantial slipcase and contains 11 volumes including a number of substantial commissioned reports.

But the report is not just long and weighty. It represents the most thorough analysis of higher education, nationally and internationally, the most closely argued case for Higher Education and its development, and the most comprehensive and detailed set of recommendations ever produced for Higher Education. Comparable exercises in USA, Canada and Australia pale into insignificance (Hannah, 1997). The Robbins Report (Dearing, 1997), its predecessor in the United Kingdom, seems a mere preface in comparison.

The Committees method of working was exceptionally thorough. Evidence and submissions were solicited widely and over 500 substantial submissions were received (Dearing, 1997). Every one of these was read by at least two members of the committee. The committee was then asked to identify the main themes from the terms of reference and the submissions. After a number of iterations these were reduced to seven and a working party of the committee was set up for each (Dearing, 1997). Research projects to provide background for each theme were commissioned by the Committee. Each working group met to consider the issues, evidence and options and then reported to the main committee (THES, 1997). Their reports formed the drafts for the chapters of the report. The committee worked and reworked the drafts and distilled the 93 recommendations 88 of which were for the whole United Kingdom and 5 of which were for Northern Ireland with its special problems (Dearing, 1997).

The sheer size and amount of detail in the report and the number of recommendations are daunting. But at the same time the recommendations are presented in a coherent inter-related way and the major responsibilities for their implementation are identified. Thus some recommendations fall to Universities themselves to implement, some to government, some to employers and some to students.

The report has been characterised (Ellis, 1998) as containing two 'big ideas.' One is the notion of a learning society where each member has the opportunity to benefit from

Education lifelong. Ellis (1998) describes such a society as widening access both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal widening means more people entering Higher Education at the first point of access, that is at the age of 18 (op.cit.). Vertical widening means Higher Education being accessed lifelong for up-dating and new learning (op.cit). Dearing (1997) justifies this Learning Society as being essential for the economic and social development of the nation. The United Kingdom will only be able to compete and flourish economically if its workforce is well educated both initially and lifelong. The nation will only develop socially to be a just and inclusive society if all are educated to appreciate the values of social justice and democracy. The Dearing(1997) Report itself characterises Higher Education as contributing to the personal, economic, social and cultural development of a learning society.

The second 'big idea' is of the means by which the Learning Society will be achieved (Ellis, 1998). This will be through what Dearing (1997) describes as a 'New Compact' between all the stakeholders. This new compact will identify the benefits to and responsibilities of all who share in Higher Education (Ellis, 1998). The stakeholders include the Universities or Institutions of Higher Education themselves; students; government; and employers. Dearing (1997) analyses in detail what is expected of each stakeholder and what each can expect from the compact. This is summarised usefully in tabular form showing each stakeholder, what they are expected to contribute and what the benefits will be for them.

So the two 'big idea's are of a Learning Society and of a New Compact to achieve it (Ellis, 1998). The text of the report and the recommendations elaborate not only on the nature of a learning society and of Higher Education's role in achieving it but also on the expectations for government and employers. It also, and most controversially in the context of the United Kingdom, analyses the benefits which students can expect from Higher Education in terms of future employment and remuneration and the responsibilities and obligations which they should meet (Hanson and Gladieux, 1992). In particular, it looks at options for students to make a greater contribution to the costs of their Higher Education and their maintenance during Higher Education. These will hardly come as surprises to those used to the United States' system (Froomkin, 1992; McPherson and Schapiro, 1999) but in the context of a system where the state hitherto supported students by paying their fees and provided maintenance grants and alongside a commitment to widen rather than restrict access, the proposals were radical and politically charged. This was particularly the case for the Labour Party, previously the party of opportunity for the disadvantaged and free education, health care and social benefit, funded from relatively high taxes. But this was so-called 'New' Labour which wanted to demonstrate that it was as capable as a Tory government in the management of the economy and the tight control of public spending.

Dearing (1997) set out several options for students to meet more of the costs and hence increase the budgets of Higher Education Institutions above a certain level. In fact, immediately after the publication of Dearing the government produced their proposed scheme, which was different from Dearing (THES, 1999/May). David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, described these recommendations as the most difficult political decision of his career (op.cit.). This has to be seen in context. The Labour government had been elected with the biggest majority in history. It had committed itself in its manifesto to the highest standards of education and widening participation. Tony Blair produced his famous (or notorious) sound bite 'The solution to our problems is education, education and education' (Newby, 1999). Labour was traditionally the party of the workers, of the disadvantaged, and of opportunity for the poor (Newby, 1999). And yet this party, far from helping students was abolishing the free part of Higher Education (the fees) and removing the maintenance grant. This was to be replaced by a loan system whereby students could borrow according to need but had to pay back from subsequent earnings (THES, 1999/May). No amount of justification or amelioration could soften this blow. The effects of the new system on access are still to be gauged but a priori they would seem unlikely to widen participation (op. cit.).

This issue of students' fees and maintenance is at the heart of policy, politics and practice in relation to widening access (Rodriquez, 1997). But vital though it is, there is a separate thread in Dearing (1997) of argument and recommendation regarding widening access and this will now be addressed.

The focus of this paper is on widening access to Higher Education. Widening access means making it possible for individuals and groups to enter who would not have entered before. This widening will be evident when more people enter, when a greater proportion of the population enter and when previously underrepresented groups become better represented (Rodriquez, 1997). These are different if related indicators. It is possible for the proportion of the population entering Higher Education to rise whilst still leaving some groups significantly underrepresented. It is possible for more people to enter but the proportions to remain the same since the population as a whole has increased. Conversely it is possible for the proportion to increase but the number to decrease if there has been a dramatic drop in the birthright. Thus, for example, if the bulge in American population should shrink there will be a smaller population who might enter Universities. If the number in Universities is to stay constant then there will have to be a larger proportion admitted. This, in its turn, might enable underrepresented groups to become better represented. But this is not necessarily the case. It might be, for example, that any increase in university places might be taken up by the already over represented middle classes thus making the disadvantage of the working classes more pronounced (THES, 1999/May).

So at the end of this diversion into the meanings of access it is worth rehearsing several concepts. At any one time there will be finite number of University places available. Students with certain demographic characteristics will fill these: gender, class, race, religion, ability and age. If the pattern of student characteristics is different from that of the population as a whole then it can be claimed that certain groups are under or over-represented. The number of students in Higher Education will be a proportion of those who, theoretically, could be students. If this is expressed for a particular age, say 18/19 is known as the participation rate. Thus a participation rate of 33% in Dearing's terms means that of every 100 18 year olds in the United Kingdom 33 are in Higher Education and 67 are not.

Another way of looking at participation is to consider the individual's life span post 18. If the average life expectancy is, say 70 then there are 52 years in which the individual could be enrolled in Higher Education. Many are never enrolled. Those who are, tend to be enrolled for 3 or 4 years post 18. A smaller number continue post graduate for Masters or Doctoral qualifications. This will add further years. Others may return at points in their life for further education or professional development. This is the notion of lifelong learning. The lifelong learning participation rate could be expressed for each year from say 21 to 70 or as a proportion of the possible years, which are actually spent in, Higher Education averaged out for the population.

Dearing (1997) argues that there should be wider participation at both the 18 year old level and through lifelong learning. The report begins with a vision for a learning society, which could be achieved in 20 years (op.cit.). There is then a description and analysis of Higher Education as it is today (op.cit.). This is backed up by studies of participation and representation. In the United Kingdom under-representation of women, which was a major problem, has now been addressed and the proportion of women in undergraduate Higher Education reflects the proportion of women in the population as a whole (THES, 1999/May). However women are still relatively under-represented at postgraduate level (op.cit.). There is, however, serious under representation still of the lower socio-economic groups (THES, 1999/Sept.). Despite the rise in overall participation the relative proportions of socio-economic classes in Higher Education has altered little (op.cit.). As mentioned above, the children of the educated have taken up the extra places. There is also under-representation by geographical location with some areas clearly under represented (op.cit.). In simple terms then widening access in the United Kingdom means, in part, reaching the working classes in depressed geographical areas.

Taking account of the aims and purposes of Higher Education and its demonstrated and potential contribution to economic and social development Dearing (1997) predicts a continuing rise in demand for Higher Education at both initial and continuing levels.

Coupling this increased demand with widening participation points unambiguously in Dearing's terms to growth in Higher Education and, incidentally, in Further Education, the subject in the United Kingdom of another major report (THES, 1997). This is the opportunity for Higher Education to be the major contributor to the economically and socially essential Learning Society. But, and it is a big reservation, Universities will have to change significantly if they are to grasp this opportunity. Likewise, government will have to embrace a long-term strategy for Higher Education and employers will have to play a more active and positive role. Students will have to accept more of the costs of their advantageous treatment. Faculty will have to become dedicated to teaching in addition to research. The report, therefore, spells out the consequences of widening access to Higher Education for all stakeholders (Dearing, 1997). The recommendations of Dearing in these regards are clear. The political and practical follow-up of these recommendations is the remaining focus of this paper.

The chapter headings of Dearing (1997) follow the logic of his argument. The recommendations are grouped in relation to each chapter. In the final half of this paper the major recommendations regarding widening access will be and its political and practical follow-up outlined. Other recommendations which have some bearing on widening access will be indicated and considered. Thus the recommendations from this significant policy document will be considered in relation to the political environment and the practical follow-up. It is a case study of the interplay of policy, practice and politics.

It should be noted that the terms of reference for the Committee of Enquiry included the following specific injunction to address widening participation. However, the government's enthusiasm for this idea is tempered by its awareness of scarce resources and, perhaps, doubts about value for money.

'The committee should have regard within the constraints of the government's spending priorities and affordability, to the principle that there should be maximum participation in initial higher education by young and mature students and in lifelong learning by adults, having regard to the needs of individuals, the nation and future labour markets.'(Dearing, 1997)

Dearing's (1997) vision, expressed at the beginning of the report, is of a Learning Society committed to learning through life for all its members. But this commitment must be a shared one between individuals, the state, employers and the providers of education and training. The national policy should, Dearing (op.cit.) argues, be to be world class both in learning and in research. This will be achieved through the new compact which will break down dysfunctional and outdated distinctions between education and training and which will be characterised by active partnerships between Higher Education Institu-

tions and the worlds of industry, commerce and public service (op.cit.).

If the Universities and other Higher Education Institutions are to play their part fully there will have to be a commitment to quality and high standards in teaching and learning and in curriculum design together with scholarship and research. So there is an acceptance here that while the best of the United Kingdom system is indisputably world class there are areas which need to improve. Further it is implied that widening access must be matched with quality assurance and even enhancement if standards are not to fall. In particular, Dearing (1997) argues, this vision will depend on professional committed members of staff who are appropriately trained, respected and rewarded and who themselves are committed to lifelong learning and professional developments. A commissioned survey of academic and support staff in Universities revealed much disaffection and a poorly articulated and patchily implemented approach to staff development (UCoSDA, 1998).

In reviewing the present state of Higher Education Dearing points out that justifiable pride can be taken in the achievements of the last 30 years (Dearing, 1997). Opportunities have expanded: 1.6 million people are students in Higher Education (UCAS, 1999). In the United Kingdom overall almost a third of young people now go into higher education from school and College, and there are even more mature students than younger ones (THES, 1999/Sept.). Over the last 20 years the number of students has much more than doubled (UCAS, 1999). While public funding for Higher Education has increased in real terms 45 percent, the unit of funding per student has fallen by 40 percent (Dearing, 1997). Public spending on Higher Education as a percentage of gross domestic product has stayed the same (Dearing, 1997).

Alongside wide spread support for the expansion of Higher Education, there are concerns that current arrangements for quality assurance are not sufficient to ensure comparability of standards in an enlarged sector (THES, 1999/Nov). Despite local initiatives, there is not national system of credit accumulation and transfer. Competition between institutions may well have hindered beneficial collaboration (Knight, 1999). Competition for research funding has probably diverted attention from the delivery of high quality teaching (op.cit.). So there are many problems to address if universities are, in partnership, to realise the learning society.

Before moving to its prescription, the Dearing Report (1997) states what it believes should be the four main purpose of the Higher Education which would sustain a learning society. These are:

* to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to their highest potential

levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;

* to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;

* to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy, at local, regional and national levels;

* to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.
(Dearing, 1997)

Thus Dearing articulates policy at a fundamental level. Higher Education is justified for its personal, social and economic benefits.

Dearing's (1997) first recommendation is to the government. It should have a long-term strategic aim of responding to increased demand for higher education. Dearing believes that much of this will be at what is described at the U.K as "sub-degree level" that is at the level below a bachelor's degree (op.cit.). Within this long term strategic aim the government should lift the present cap at full-time undergraduate places over the next 2 - 3 years and remove the cap on full-time sub-degree places immediately (op.cit.). In response to this recommendation the government has articulated a long-term strategic aim as part of its detailed response to Dearing. The new Labour government produced at the beginning of 1998 its vision for the learning society entitled,"The Learning Age" (DfEE, 1998). This inspirational document was based on the Dearing Report (1997), the Kennedy Report (THES, 1997) on Further Education, and the Fryer Report (THES, 1997) on Lifelong Learning. The government could do little other. Its election manifesto made much of the need to educate all members of society to the highest possible level through a high quality system (Knight, 1999). So, hardly surprising the government's fine words matched those of Dearing. Furthermore the Prime Minister Tony Blair promised a significant increase in full time numbers early in the millennium (THES, 1999/Nov). But the caps have not as yet been lifted on student numbers. Some alleviation of the cap however is being promised to those institutions who can demonstrate their capacity to widen participation for under represented groups (op.cit).

This latter approach reflected Dearing's (1997) second recommendation which was that the government and the funding bodies should, when allocating funds for the expansion of Higher Education, give priority to those institutions which were able to demonstrate a commitment to widening participation. To be eligible for these funds an institution would have to have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and

provision for review by its governing body of its achievements (op.cit.). This recommendation was wholly supported in the government's statement (DfEE, 1998)) and lead immediately to action by the funding councils. (It should be noted that funding for Higher Education in the U. K. is the responsibility of four bodies: The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC); the Welsh Higher Education Funding Council (WHEFC) and the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI). (Dearing, 1997).) Each funding council top-sliced a proportion of its budget to be allocated to those institutions producing the best plans for widening participation (op. cit.). It is perhaps early days to judge the effectiveness of this scheme, however the funding councils are taking monitoring very seriously and at the time of writing have just produced their first performance tables indicating those Higher Education Institutions which have indeed widened participation and, as significantly, those who haven't (HEFCE, 1999).

Dearing's third recommendation (1997) encouraged the funding of projects designed to address low expectations and achievement and to promote progression to Higher Education. The recommendation was aimed at the funding bodies for both Higher Education and Further Education. In the United Kingdom Higher Education includes Universities and a number of so called Institutes of Higher Education, the term is defined by level Higher Education's central business is undergraduate and postgraduate provision but includes sub-degree work at diploma level. Further Education is defined in part as provided for those who are aged 16 plus. Compulsory education in the United Kingdom ends at the age 16. Further Education includes courses at all levels from adult literacy classes up to sub-degree work. So, there is a small overlap between Further Education and Higher Education in sub-degree diploma level work. Although compulsory education extends to 16, many pupils stay on at school until the age of 18, usually to complete courses required for entrance to Higher Education (THES, 1997). Thus, secondary schools overlap with Further Education since some pupils who have left school at the age of 16 enter a Further Education college to complete their University entrance qualifications (THES, 1997).

Dearing (1997) recognises that widening participation is a complex business involving secondary schools, Further Education and Higher Education. This particular recommendation therefore is aimed at encouraging collaboration between Further Education and Higher Education. Many Universities have already begun this process of collaboration with for example, designated "feeder" courses in Further Education colleges aimed at encouraging progression to appropriate courses in Higher Education (op.cit.). A further dimension is provided by so called Community Education. This form of education is defined in part as occurring outside of educational institutions in various voluntary groups in the community (McNamee and Lovett, 1992). A full response to the Dearing (1997)

recommendation would be a project integrating community, further, and higher education since, at its best, community education can reach those adults with low expectations and relative disadvantage.

Dearing's (1997) next recommendation, again aimed at the funding bodies, is that additional funds should be allocated to pilot projects in institutions which enrol students from particularly disadvantaged localities. One of the studies commissioned by Dearing (1997) identified that disadvantage and under representation in Higher Education was concentrated in the lower socio-economic groups and in particular in geographic localities. Interestingly disadvantage by gender was no longer apparent, nor broadly interpreted, was disadvantage by race (an issue complicated in United Kingdom by high achieving groups) (op.cit.). Pilot projects therefore would aim to identify particular disadvantage localities and to increase the number of students enrolled from them. United Kingdom universities all tend to have a strong local enrolment and this is likely to increase with the new arrangements for student funding or rather non-funding (DfEE, 1998).

If a University is based in a disadvantaged locality, and by in large they are not, then increasing local enrolment might meet this recommendation. For other Universities more innovative steps would be necessary. A good example of such an approach is the combined scheme between Glasgow and Paisley Universities in Scotland who have opened a new campus in Dumfries, a relatively disadvantaged locality (THES, 1999/July). Whereas, Thames Valley University, based in a disadvantaged locality of London, targeted disadvantaged students and met with some success in enrolling them (THES, 1999/May). Unfortunately, mismanagement coupled with genuine difficulties in maintaining standards brought the University into a crisis which is still being remedied (op.cit.).

Dearing's (1997) fifth recommendation addresses the welfare needs of students. First the government is asked to consider the possibility of restoring to full time students some entitlement to social security benefit (op.cit.). At present full time students may not claim social security (Goddard, 1999). Two particular groups are identified, that is those who temporarily withdraw from Higher Education due to illness and those students with dependent children aged over 16 (op.cit.). Since the latter of these groups must be mature students this raises the whole issue of support for mature and part-time students.

The second part of this recommendation referred to the access funds made available to Universities to assist students in difficulty. These relatively small sums of money are allocated within the Universities by student services to cases of particular hardship (THES, 1999/May). Dearing (1997) recommends that the funds should be doubled and that their scope extended to facilitate participation by students who would otherwise be unable to enter Higher Education. So far this has not happened (Goddard, 1999). And the picture

is further complicated by the complaints from many Universities that the staff-intensive administration of access funds can in some cases consume as many resources as the funds themselves (op.cit.).

Dearing's (1997) explicit attention to widening access concludes with recommendations concerning students with disabilities. Such students, lesser in number than the socio-economically and geographically under represented, are nevertheless under represented in Higher Education (THES, 1999/Sept). Dearing (1997) recommends that the funding bodies should provide funding for institutions to provide learning support for students with disabilities. Further Dearing(op.cit.) recommends that the proposed Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education should include the learning needs of students with disabilities as a key theme in its activities. Finally Dearing (1997) suggests that the government should extend the scope of the Disabled Students Allowance so that it is available without a parental means test and to part time students, postgraduate students and those who having become disabled wish to obtain a second Higher Education qualification.

These recommendations were supported in principle by the government in its white paper, The Learning Age (DfEE, 1998). However, the additional finances required have not yet been made available (THES, 1999/May). In particular those affecting welfare benefit or its equivalent have fallen foul of the comprehensive social security review (op. cit.). This review which aims to save money and thus, inevitably, to remove benefit from some who at present receive it, has proved one of the most unpopular policies of the new Labour government (op.cit.). This government, albeit with the largest majority this century, is keen to demonstrate its commitment to restrictions on public spending and the encouragement of industry and commerce through lower taxes. The government treads a narrow line in trying to win over even more disaffected conservative voters while at the same time not alienating its own traditional socialist supporters.

A strength of the Dearing (1997) report is its recognition that widening participation goes beyond specific steps to admit more and different students. The whole system must be reviewed to ensure that it is able to cater not only for more students but for students who may require different and more intensive teaching methods and support. The report includes therefore a number of recommendations which are not themselves about widening participation but are about preparing the Universities and the system as a whole for the admission of such students (op.cit.).

All Universities are enjoined to give high priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students' learning (Newman, 1996). This learning, Dearing (1997) believes, will be mediated increasingly through

the use of the new communication and information technology. All Universities should, therefore Dearing (op.cit.) recommends, review the changing role of staff as a result of Communication Information Technology, and ensure that staff and students receive appropriate training and support to enable them to realise its full potential. In order to place these initiatives in context Dearing (op.cit.) recommends that all Universities should have a comprehensive Communications and Information Technology strategy. Dearing (op.cit.) criticises Universities as having a haphazard or non-existent approach to the development of their staff. The report therefore recommends that all Universities should have a comprehensive Staff Development strategy (op.cit.). Thus in order to prepare for widened participation Dearing recommends a "basket" of strategic plans addressing learning and teaching, communications and information technology, and staff development (op. cit.).

However, not only must Universities themselves change, so must the Higher Education system as a whole. Dearing (1997) recommends that the new government Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) should take a number of steps to ensure that qualifications reach an appropriate standard and that institutions are efficiently managed to achieve those standards. The agency should undertake its work through: benchmarking standards in each University subject using expert panels; undertaking subject reviews in all Universities against these benchmarks; and by undertaking overall institutional reviews (Dearing, 1997). Alongside this work the Agency should produce a qualifications framework for the whole United Kingdom and facilitate credit accumulation and transfer within this framework (op. cit.). These measures have moved forward with remarkable expedition with the QAA funded by the Funding Councils (Newby, 1999). Compliance with the QAA is a requirement if a University wishes to receive funding (Newby, 1999).

It should be clear from the nature of these recommendations that widening participation is a long-term strategy. However, the fiscal steps already implemented by the funding councils are a real encouragement to Universities to move quickly. It is therefore interesting to see where Universities have reached two years on from the Dearing Report. The Higher Education Funding Councils have set in place a monitor of widened participation and their first league table of relative University success has just been published (HEFCE, 1999).

The figures published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England show that the majority of Universities and Colleges have a long way to go to broaden access to all able students (HEFCE, 1999). Even those Universities that take a high proportion of students from state schools (as opposed to the more elitist public schools) tend to select students from higher social classes (op.cit.). It would appear that young people from wealthy areas are ten time more likely to enter Higher Education than those from the

poorest backgrounds (op.cit.). Conversely there is evidence that the potential students from poor backgrounds who do have the ability to benefit from Higher Education are not receiving the opportunity to do this (op.cit.).

The funding councils make clear that institutions have responded to government calls to widen access at least at the level of statements of intent. The Funding Councils have asked all institutions to produce a strategy for widening participation and HEFCE (1999) plans to use the performance indicators to identify and disseminate good practice.

Perhaps the most significant single effect attributed, somewhat inaccurately, to Dearing (1997) is the new system of student support. In essence this requires students to pay fees and removes the previously available maintenance grant. In place of the grant students may receive a loan to be paid back out of future earnings (THES, 1999/May). While attributed to Dearing (1997) this was not actually Dearing's recommendation. Rather, the government selected some of Dearing's arguments to support its own scheme which was published simultaneously with the Dearing report (THES, 1999/Sept). This government proposal, which received massive and wide spread criticism, nevertheless became law at the same time that the government published Learning Age (DfEE, 1998) welcoming the vast majority of Dearing's recommendations. Whatever the rights and wrongs of students being required to pay for their education, it seems certain that it will not widen participation. The evidence available so far (UCAS 1999) suggests that the scheme is reducing applications generally and, specifically from lower socio-economic groups (THES, 1999/May).

This assignment has identified, on the wing as it were, policy, politics and practice for Higher Education in the United Kingdom. The policy was generated in response to a financial crisis. The Dearing committee would not have been set up had the Universities not been facing a crisis and that crisis was the incompatibility of widening participation and reducing the unit of resource. Dearing (1997) produced a compelling vision of a learning society where participation would increase and a new compact between stakeholders would provide the resources. While the government welcomed and in many respects implemented this vision only one solution has addressed the financial crisis (DfEE, 1998). And that solution, charging students for their Higher Education, is a real deterrent for widened participation (HEFCE, 1999). The New Compact must lead to increased investment in Higher Education. So far only the students have provided this and it is not entirely clear whether the money saved on student fees and maintenance grants will find its way to the Universities. More money must still be found by government, through taxes, or from Industry. The crisis has not been solved but there is a clearer vision of the solution.

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