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Inexpensive Advice: The Dearing Report*
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Two Perspectives on Dearing

One might comment on this Report in two different if complementary ways. One is to speak directly to what the Report says, addressing its text and recommendations for their consistency and wisdom. As you may imagine, that leads me to a quite critical review. The other is to ask what an alternative Report might have said, one not so bound by its narrow charge, prepared by a committee chaired by someone other than a civil servant, a committee able to be bolder and more radical in its recommendations, not so constrained by the structure and arrangements it found in place when it began its work, asking what would be the right system of higher education for the next few decades rather than how to fix the immediate problems that the system and the Government presented to them.¹✻

The Dearing Committee, as well as the Labour Government, inherited the higher education system left to them by the long Tory Government of 1979-1997. And the Committee, led by a senior civil servant, would not have chosen to rail against the realities that faced it; on the contrary, for all the talk about its concern for the long term, it was clearly appointed to deal with some very pressing immediate issues, not least the shortfall in finance across the system. Most of the British comment I have seen has taken the Report on its own terms, and discussed its recommendations and the Governments' probable responses to them within its terms of reference and the immediate and short-term situation.

But as a foreign observer I am not so constrained. While understanding what the Report was meant to do -- not least to take higher education out of the general election campaign of 1997, and the introduction of tuition out of the

* Forthcoming in Higher Education Quarterly, Fall 1997.

¹ This paper addresses the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, Higher Education in the Learning Society, HMSO, June 1997. I have looked through the Appendices, but if they included anything the Committee thought really useful it has appeared in the main Report. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are to the main Report.

political arena -- I have been reading the Report quite differently, as a symptom or a statement of a broadly shared view, cutting across party lines, of the role and nature of this country's system of higher education: of its proper structure, its functions in and for the society, and its guiding values and principles. And then I ask whether that view may not conceal assumptions about universities, about students and teachers and researchers, that will continue to create problems for British colleges and universities of a kind not addressed in this Report.

Flawed Perspectives

I want to point to some fundamental problems of the Report that I believe vitiate its significance and usefulness to the future of higher education in the UK - or to put it in American idiom, why Dearing is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Chief among these is that the Report does not develop a conception of what British higher education, as a system, should look like, or what direction in the Committee's view it should take in the next decades. If someone had asked him his views on these large matters, Dearing himself might not have understood the question. Large conceptions of the size and shape of a system of higher education, he might have said, are for academics like Lord Robbins or politicians like Tony Crosland. But such dreams and visions and large conceptions of the future are not for civil servants. And he might have expanded his answer this way:²

``Unlike foreign academics, we are not interested in vague talk about future goals or hypothetical arrangements. What we found when the Committee first came together is described in our Chapter 3, ``Higher Education Today'': 176 institutions of all kinds, 115 of which are called universities, enrolling some 1.6 million students, 1.1 of them studying full time, enrollment figures which have grown very rapidly in the past decade. All this costs about 10 billion pounds from all sources, of which central government provides about two-thirds.(3.97) All this left us with two big problems which we have addressed:

The first is the crisis of resources, which threatens to become worse as enrollments grow, the Government's support continues to decline, as it ends support grants and ceases to fund capital growth. The second, flowing from the first, is the threat to academic quality and standards arising from the decline in per capita support by nearly half and the doubling of student/staff ratios in less than

² The inverted commas are meant to indicate that this is what Dearing might have said in reply to critics like myself. The words of course are my own.

two decades, with further declines projected for the next decade at least. We have done what we could within the constraints laid on us by the Conservative government's policies and finance. On the first big issue, we have taken the important and unpopular step of recommending the introduction, for the first time, of fees to be paid by full-time students or their families, fees which we assumed would remain with the institution in which the student was enrolled to mitigate the most severe effects of recent and future cuts in state support for higher education. On the second big issue of how to maintain academic standards in the face of these cuts in support, we have made many recommendations, arguing that old patterns of teacher/student relationship that may have been possible under student/staff ratios of 8:1 are no longer possible. The changed circumstances of British higher education require changed patterns of teaching, new patterns which involve a much more efficient use of their time by both teachers and students. Better institutional management of the time of staff, and the use of the new modes of instructional technology may mitigate the negative effects of the sharp decline of resources going into teaching -- negative effects which we mention briefly though we see no point in dwelling on them.

So, to our critics we say that we have done our best to at least slow the steady hemorrhaging of resources by recommending the introduction of tuition fees, while making clear that only better and tighter management, in the old universities as in the new, can cushion the effects of underfunding on quality. That means that the old universities are going to have to come to look more like the new ones rather than the other way around. Put briefly, we have done our best with a bad hand; it is up to governments to deal us better cards."

That I think is the case the Committee would make to critics like myself. For me it is not good enough. The Report fails for a variety of reasons beyond its inability or refusal to project a vision of the size and shape of British higher education over the next decades.

1. The Report is a civil service document rather than an independent review of a complex set of problems. It anticipates and accepts broad Government assumptions and guidelines, those included in its charge and those that are unspoken but understood. It does not address any fundamental problems of the system that have not been brought to its attention by Government; it does not define as a problem anything which is not defined by Government as a problem.

2. A major failing is that the Report is written from outside the system, looking in. Despite the fact that the

Committee included eight university administrators, one does not have the sense that it was written out of direct experience with teaching or research in the universities and colleges. It does not reflect the structure of values or common responses of ordinary teachers -- perhaps because the Committee did not include a single ordinary university teacher who could bring that experience into its discussions. And despite the mass of evidence gathered, at point after point the Report reveals a shocking ignorance about how universities actually work, and how their administrators and teaching staff have responded to the pressures of the past two decades. There is no serious description or analysis of the transformation of the teaching/learning environment as the student/staff ratio has doubled, and as the administrative staffs have expanded and expanded again under the burden of accountability documents and reports. And how much of the creative imagination of the senior administrative staff has gone into trying to outwit HEFC with one barely legal scam after another. Oliver Fulton and I have been studying the ways in which new and old universities have been coping with these managerial and funding regimes; we have hours of interviews detailing what it has been like to keep an institution's head above water in the face of a steady and unremitting diet of falsely labeled "efficiency gains."³ And one would never dream that the world that we have been studying in the field is the same world that Dearing is preaching to. It is the gulf between the rhetoric of the Report and the realities on the ground that I have found both striking and depressing.

3. The Report sharply separates its discussions of finance and funding from its chapters on teaching and learning. This violates the first principles of effective policy analysis, and makes the sections on teaching and learning seem trivial and irrelevant, its recommendations more like empty rhetoric rather than serious reflections on difficult problems. Again and again the Report makes recommendations for yet new forms of accountability and assessment without any regard for their costs -- and not just their financial costs -- to the institutions and people affected. Under those conditions rhetoric and exhortation fill the gap in resources. This separation of the discussions of teaching from sections on finance has led me to subtitle this paper "Inexpensive Advice," pointing to the Report's steady exhortation to academic staff everywhere to do more and more with less and less.

³ See O. Fulton, "Differentiation and Diversity in a Newly Unitary System: the case of the United Kingdom," in V.I. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen & R. Rinne, eds, The Mockers and the Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Differentiation, Convergence and Diversity in Higher Education, Pergamon, 1996; M. Trow, "Managerialism and the Academic Profession: The Case of England," in Higher Education Policy, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1994, pp. 11-18; and Trow, "American Perspectives on British Higher Education under Thatcher and Major," in Oxford Review of Education, Winter 1998, forthcoming.

4. Dearing makes recommendations for British higher education as if it were a single and homogeneous entity, like road transport, the object of a single set of government policies. But British higher education is already too diverse to be captured in any single set of policies, or to respond in similar and predictable ways to any set of broad encompassing recommendations. The fundamental recommendations, like most central government policy for higher education in recent years, are sufficiently far from the realities of this diversity so as to ensure the failure of many of them.

5. The Report shows little concern for how its recommendations to the universities would be implemented by those institutions. It is addressed throughout to Government and university administrators, and leaves to them the problem of actually putting its recommendations into effect -- again reflecting its lack of understanding of how colleges and universities actually work.

6. The Report does not acknowledge any continuing necessity to gain better knowledge of how the system of higher education and its constituent institutions function and change. Nowhere does the Report make provision for continuing policy-related research on British higher education. Presumably the Committee sees this as a monopoly of the civil service, but the Report itself reveals the inadequacy of that conception of the relation of information and knowledge to good policy.

Many observers have noted how often in the past two decades central government policies have not had their intended outcomes, and have been canceled or reversed in a year or two after having been put into place -- just long enough to demonstrate their failure. One such policy was the effort a few years ago to have universities bid against one another for places, with the intention to award places to the lowest bidder. Apart from the dubious educational wisdom of putting quality at risk in this way, the policy failed in the face of a university cartel refusing to bid competitively. Another set of failures arose out of start-stop policies alternately encouraging and discouraging institutional expansion; some universities which bet wrong and hoped for continuing expansion are still paying the price. Yet another was the failure of the Private Finance Initiative as a solution to the "problem" of finding resources for capital investment.

All of these failures, and the list could be considerably extended, arose out of a pattern of "policies driven by intent" rather than by the kind of close analysis that assesses the probable outcomes of a policy initiative. To a foreign observer, policy makers for British higher

education have not understood the difference between simply adopting policies aimed at achieving desired outcomes, and underpinning policies with research and thus increasing the chances that they might actually be successful. The only policies for higher education that the British government and its agencies have been able to enforce over the past two decades have been the steady reductions in central government funding and their requirements for more paper accountability, though they have not been able to ensure the accuracy or reliability of the latter.

Good policies, as academic administrators will know in their own domains, require that decision-makers have good information and a deep understanding of the policy area, as well as the power and authority to make and enforce the policies. Dearing does not have that kind of understanding, and its recommendations, aside from those on funding and student support, are largely irrelevant to the real problems of academics and their institutions.

Finance

Let us begin by juxtaposing what few sentences the Committee has to say about academic staff morale with the resources that they anticipate as available to enable that staff to meet and fulfill the many injunctions the Committee places on them.

"Our survey showed that academic staff are not content with the way they spend their time. They would like to spend less time on administration and management and to transfer the time to research.... Over half of those doing research claim to be doing it outside normal working time. It is also evident from our survey that academic staff are concerned about the quality of support they can offer to students and feel it has declined over the last five years." (3.36)

In his Introduction, the Chairman expresses concern for the level of funding required to meet all the many challenges that society, government and the Committee lay on the institutions and their members:

"We are particularly concerned about the planned further reductions in the unit of funding for higher education. If these are carried forward, it would have been halved in 25 years. We believe this would damage both the quality and effectiveness of higher education." ("An Introductory Comment", p. 2, no. 7) And this introduces the Chairman's interest in new forms of funding, specifically payments by students for some part of their education, which the Report hopes will be given full credit in government funding -- a somewhat oblique way of saying

that it hopes the money will remain with the students' institutions.

The basis for concern appears in several places in the Report, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in Chart 3.16, "Index of public funding per student for higher education 1978-9 to 1995-6" which shows that "public funding per student in higher education institutions has fallen by more than 40 per cent since 1976." Moreover "if the further reductions in the public expenditure plans up to 1999-2000 were added, the cumulative reduction would be around 50 per cent." (3.96)

The Report distributes blame equitably: "While the reduction in unit funding was intended by the Government, institutions themselves contributed to it when, in response to funding incentives, they opted to recruit additional students at lower than average levels of unit funding to maximize their overall income." (3.96) But the Report does not mention that the Higher Education Funding Council(E) had encouraged that behavior at a point when it was encouraging expansion, and had gone so far as to say that institutions which admitted students "at lower than average levels of unit funding" that year (often to avoid a painful shedding of staff) would be fully funded for those additional students the following and succeeding years. A change in central government policy the following year left those compliant or optimistic institutions hanging out to dry.

But while the early statements by Dearing about funding suggest at least an awareness of how drastic changes in support by Government might bear on the institutions' capacities to meet new, or even their old, obligations adequately, reading further gives a quite different impression. In the section on funding, we read:

"The essential consideration that we have addressed is how far a reduction of 6.5 per cent over [the next] two years in the unit of funding, in addition to the more than 40 per cent reduction achieved [i.e., imposed] since 1976, is sustainable without significant damage to the quality of the student experience and to the research base. This reduction of 6.5 per cent includes the full impact of the Government's decision to reduce substantially from 1995-96 onwards capital funding for equipment purchases and the refurbishment of institutions estates, and the decision by Government and the Funding Bodies to stop separately identifying capital funding from 1996-98 onwards. Institutions are now expected to meet such costs in full from their general recurrent funding." (17.16)

A 40 per cent reduction in the unit of funding, and now the ending of all capital funding for higher education! That might be an introduction to reflections on the ramified

consequences of these radical cuts in public funding for higher education in the UK. On the contrary, in the very next paragraph we read that "We believe that, over time, with further growth in student numbers, institutions can reduce their costs further. But a 6.5 per cent reduction in unit funding is not achievable in two years without putting quality unacceptably at risk. How much and how fast institutions are able to reduce their costs will depend, in part, on their ability to exploit opportunities for expansion and exploit the potential of communications and information technology." ((17.17) The Committee answers that question a few paragraphs later:

"We conclude that across the whole higher education system it will be possible to deliver the 6.5 per cent reduction in expenditure anticipated in the spending plans of the previous Government over the next seven years, provided that

- *growth is resumed in the system;
- *the additional capital investment which we have identified is implemented;
- *there is investment in all staff to help meet the challenge they face." (17.45)

And then the bottom line: "After allowing for further savings (bringing the total to 10% [cut in the unit of funding]) by 2015-16 the savings delivered would be L365 million in 2005/06 and L580 million in 2015/16." (17.45)

And where would these great savings to come from? The big items are: 1. "more students on shorter courses," 2. "reductions in units of funding," and 3. "new approaches to teaching", the latter shorthand for the introduction of information technologies into higher education.

So, despite the meliorist language, Dearing anticipates a further reduction in the unit of resource of 6.5% over the next 7 years, and of 10% over the next 17 years. We need to keep that in mind as we read about the additional obligations that Dearing would place on British colleges and universities.

An outsider is struck by the tendency of governmental agencies to provide euphemisms for budget cuts, as for example, "savings" and "efficiency gains". The latter is so common that it has lost its inverted commas, and is referred to that way by people who know that in British higher education "efficiency gains" are nothing but cuts. An "efficiency gain," properly speaking, refers to an increase in the production of goods and services at a given level of quality for the same or equal input of resources; or the production of a given amount of those goods or services of given quality for the expenditure of less resources; or a gain in quality of output with cost and

quantity held constant. The use of the term "efficiency gains" for the cuts in higher education over the past few decades simply by repetition of the term asserts that the cuts in unit costs have not lowered the quality of the education provided by British universities. In a certain sense, all actors in British higher education have had an interest in the acceptance of that assertion, both in Britain and abroad.

With respect to information technology (IT), the Report is right to see it as a major force in the decades ahead, and no one can fault them for not knowing what its ramified effects will be. Not even Bill Gates can see very far ahead in this rapidly changing sphere of technology and use. But that makes its projection of a "saving" of £200 million a year by the year 2015/16 wholly without credibility -- surely a device for artificially balancing a projected budget far ahead. The Report is predicting here that the use of IT will permit Government support for higher education to decline by a given amount, again asserting that this sum "should be" saved by the institutions -- though to my knowledge no university in Britain or elsewhere has yet saved any money through the introduction of IT. On the contrary, most universities have found it to be yet another heavy addition to the many claims on their resources. The Committee itself recognizes that IT to date has not shown any tendency to reduce costs: "Many of these [IT] initiatives were set up in the expectation that using new technology would lead to more cost-effective teaching; they have almost invariably led to higher costs, with greater efficiency still a promise for the future." (17.40). Nevertheless, the Report continues, "The average cost of provision is likely to be reduced without necessarily reducing the quality of experience for students." (17.42). The Committee peers into a very cloudy crystal ball to see "savings" nearly two decades ahead, when experts cannot see six months ahead. I suspect that any "savings" from IT will take the form of "cuts," despite the enormous costs of new infrastructure and technical support, exacerbated by the incredibly rapid rate of change in the technology and in the forms it takes in its applications to higher education.⁴

The Committee's treatment of Government underfunding of the system emerges almost painfully from its discussion of capital expenditure. It first notes that "The Government's decision to impose further significant year on year reductions in the unit of funding from 1995-96, and essentially to withdraw long term capital funding, has put a dual pressure on expenditure on refurbishment of the estate;

⁴ See M. Trow, "The Development of Information Technology in American Higher Education," Daedalus, Vol. 126, No. 4 (Fall 1997), pp.293-314.

on replacing out-of-date equipment and on investing in new communications and information technology equipment" (17.59) -- that is, the kind of equipment that presumably will "save" 200 million pounds in 2015. Indeed, Dearing continues, "Against this background it is difficult to see how, without additional funding, institutions can be expected to contribute to ensuring that students have access to networked desktop computers as we recommend." (17.60) Worse, "if expenditure on infrastructure is foregone, there will be an increase in the proportion of accommodation that is either unfit for its purpose or possibly at risk of closure under health and safety legislation." (17.61)

But, the Report, mindful of its masters, continues: "On the other hand, the responsibility for funding net additions to estates should rest firmly with institutions themselves either through borrowing, financed by the income stream which the addition to the estate generates, or through using accumulated reserves." (17.63)

The reference to "accumulated reserves" will make most academics either laugh or cry. The Committee has already noted that nearly two out of every five British colleges and universities were in deficit in 1996, (3.97), and that figure is growing; very few of the others have any substantial reserves. The other suggestion, that institutions borrow for capital growth to be financed from future operating budgets, ensures further staff cuts over and above the further 6 or 10 per cent the Report already anticipates. Because surely the Committee knows that not all additions to the estate generate additional income streams; for example, continuing investments in libraries, or information technology, or labs remain necessary whether or not there are additional enrollments. But even with additional enrollments, mortgaging operating budgets, as many British universities have already learned, is a recipe for further staff cuts. And it is in light of past and future staff cuts that we must view the Committee's recommendations regarding teaching and learning.

To Disaggregate a Diverse System

The report, as a civil service document must, prides itself on its realism -- at least its fiscal if not its educational realism. For example, fairly early it reminds the reader that we live "in a world in which it is unrealistic to expect a return to former staff to student ratios." (8.15). But the Committee does not know what former or current student/staff ratios were or are. Of course it knows what average student/staff ratios were and are, simply by dividing the number of students by the number of teaching staff, with appropriate adjustments for part-timers on both sides. But the Committee does not know,

or see as significant, the wide range in student/staff ratios that can be found between institutions and between departments within institutions, though that, and not the average ratio, is the teaching environment - defines the educational reality -- for both staff and students. That ratio varies widely in British higher education, from ratios in some science departments not far from what they were two decades ago -- 10:1 or so -- to ratios of 25:1 or higher in some social science departments..

These variations, resulting either from the ability of some institutions or departments to raise funds outside the government grant, or a decision by the institution to divert funds to defend some under enrolled department, nevertheless allows elite higher education to survive in some places in British higher education. And it would seem to me that crucial questions for national policy, of the kind that Dearing might have addressed, would be: first, do we want these variations to persist -- or put differently -- do we want elite forms of higher education to survive into an era of mass higher education? and if so, what policies of central government might make that possible?

Those questions would have forced the Committee to disaggregate "British higher education" in its analysis and recommendations, not just rhetorically in the form of expressions of approval of "diversity", but substantively, by discussing how various policies would affect quite differently the different forms of higher education in the UK. The references in Dearing to a welcome diversity in British higher education are pro forma; the text and its many comments and recommendations are predicated on a uniformity among institutions of higher education that is neither factually true nor desirable, even by the Committee's own values.

The kind of modal institution that is envisaged in most of the Report's recommendations -- apart from those which explicitly speak to research and research funding -- is a post 1992, primarily teaching, university. Or put differently, Dearing does not really envision the survival of genuinely elite forms of higher education predicated on student/staff ratios of under 10:1, even though that kind of education still exists in British universities, and struggles to continue to exist even when student/staff ratios rise above that figure. The Report ironically seems to assume the existence of that kind of education, based on close student/teacher relationships, in many of its paragraphs on teaching and learning. But nowhere does it confront the problems of meeting its elite expectations at levels of funding for a mass system. The discrepancy, the lack of congruity, between its often elite educational conceptions for all of British higher education, and its assumptions about the resources available for the whole

system, is a continually jarring experience for this reader. And the gulf between expectations and resources is filled by exhortation and "recommendations." The exhortations to all institutions of higher education, but most particularly to their teaching staffs, are, in aggregate: "You must do more and more, better and better, with less and less." What are the likely consequences of such a discrepancy between resources and teaching/learning? My guess is that the advice on resources will be broadly accepted by Government to whom they are directed, while the advice on how to improve teaching and learning will be mostly ignored by the universities and their staffs to whom they are directed -- ignored as unrealistic as is the return of the whole system to the "former" student/staff ratios.⁵

It is certainly true, as I suggested many years ago, that no country is rich enough to support a system of mass higher education at the per capita cost levels of elite higher education; no mass system can be funded at student/staff ratios of 8:1. On the other hand, elite forms can and do survive within all mass systems, and in almost all institutions, invisible to the outsider, at elite levels of support. The relentless orthodoxy in the UK is that one must assume an equality of resources for teaching among all institutions. That orthodoxy, and its effect on the kinds of recommendations we find in Dearing, may not itself destroy the remaining places in which elite forms survive, but they do not do anything to help them survive either.

Teaching and Learning: Expectations and Exhortations

After this brief review of Dearing's assessment of the resource situation, which under the new Government looks to be harsher than even he imagined, let us look at what the Report has to say about teaching and learning.

On the whole, they say a good deal about all sorts of things having to do with "the private life" of higher education -- the life that is experienced in lecture hall and seminar, in a teacher's room or office, in the libraries and laboratories -- the life of teaching and learning by contrast with issues of organization, management, governance and finance that I have called "the public life" of higher education. And here, my sense of the Report as coming from a body outside looking in is very strong. There is very little feeling of that life as students and teachers live

⁵ This assumes more rational behavior by the institutions and their organizations than perhaps is warranted. Over the past decades the CVCP has embraced any number of policies which have injured their members, usually on the grounds that the alternative would be worse. The test will come in how the higher education community responds to Dearing's proposal for a strengthened QAA, and its consequences for the autonomy of British colleges and universities.

and experience it, an extraordinary amount of exhortation to staff to do more with less, and little sense of the enormous variety in that experience. Because if the Committee had acknowledged and considered the implications of that variety -- not just rhetorically but functionally -- then it would have been impossible for them to make the sweeping judgments and recommendations that they do.

The tone of their views on students and learning, and on the work of the academics themselves, is established very early in their chapter on that subject:

``Teachers will have to respond to a changing-- and more discerning and demanding-- student population. They are more likely to have to work increasingly in partnership -- or in competition-- with publishers, film-makers and broadcasters as the growth of information technology opens up new ways of learning and teaching. They will be increasingly involved in learning partnerships with major employers. They will need to deliver a learning experience in higher education which enthuses students to become lifelong learners. They will need to encourage all students to aspire to a deep understanding and experience of their area of study at whatever level they are studying.'' (8.2)

The object of these mandates are university and college "teachers," wholly undifferentiated by type of institution, or discipline, or research interests. Moreover, all these supposed ``needs'' are mixtures of prediction and preference; they are simply asserted and not demonstrated; even when partly true, they vary greatly in urgency and character among different kinds of institutions and subjects, and students of different talents and motivations. And meeting those "needs", where that is possible or desirable, may have real costs in time, energy and money attached to them. Of these important qualifications we hear little or nothing: neither of diversity nor of costs. Without those dimensions of reality they remain mere platitudes.

We hear that kind of empty platitude again in their Recommendation 8 (p.112): ``We recommend that, with immediate effect, all institutions of higher education give high priority to developing and implanting learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students' learning''. I like particularly the intensifier ``with immediate effect:'' the phrase suggests how strong is the Committee's illusion that universities are organized like proper business firms, bureaucratically, with clear lines of authority that can ensure that instructions down the line will be obeyed "with immediate effect."

Their discussion of this crucial recommendation follows:

“We recognize the scale of the challenge to institutions in our prescription of national excellence in teaching and the management of learning. The rise in student numbers over the last decade, and the continuing pressure on institutional finances resulting in lower staff to student ratios, has meant larger class sizes and less contact time for students. We note some research that has indicated that students perform worse in large classes, and markedly so in many subject areas, particularly the social sciences. We are aware of how many students, out of necessity, have to seek part-time work during term time, and the effect this may have on their performance. (8.11)

“Given the increased time students spend in independent study, the task of planning the time they spend learning becomes ever more important. To manage the learning process for more diverse and greater numbers of students, teachers will have to consider the trade-off between the quantity and the quality of time spent with students. Planning for learning means that designing the forms of instruction which support learning becomes as important as preparing the content of programmes.”(8.13).

Here the very clear message is that given the new conditions in British higher education -- higher student/staff ratios, larger class sizes, less contact time with teachers, and so forth -- better management must replace the missing resources. This may be right for some subjects in some institutions; it surely is not right for all, and the question is not addressed about what to do where it is not right. Some part of the work of higher education chiefly involves the transmission of skills and knowledge -- the skills themselves may be of a very high order. Other kinds of courses and programs aim at the shaping of mind and sensibility, the development of independent and critical modes of thought. These different aims call for quite different forms of instruction. And the balance between these kinds of higher education differs sharply between institutions. So these generalized assertions simply do not apply across the board of colleges and universities, and despite the reference to the “diversity of students” the recommendation ironically ignores both their diversity of talents and interests, and also the diversity between and within institutions in the aims and functions of the instruction provided.

Such generalized assertions about what must or should happen also do not reflect the actual processes by which decisions are made about teaching and learning in universities, and about the very considerable authority over teaching that still inheres in the teaching staff itself. On the whole, if anything good is to happen in a university it must depend on the willing involvement, or at least the

assent, of the teaching staff. The bureaucratic assumptions of the Report are reflected in its absence of concern about how that willing assent can be evoked; implicit in much of what is recommended is that if only the senior administrative staff of an institutions can be persuaded about a course of action, then it can find the means to introduce and implement new policies.

The last Government found that it could impose its will on academics, first by cutting the unit of resource, and then by linking funding directly to the research activity of departments. But I am doubtful that any policy of that Government or its funding agency led to more effective teaching. And that, I believe, is because those Government policies, like the Committee, never worried about how to gain the support and willing assent of the academic staff. So in their discussions of teaching and learning, in addition to the lack of specific attention to the costs of change or to the relevance of institutional diversity, there is also no real concern for implementation. No wonder the exhortations are so hollow.

National reports like this tend to avoid the difficult questions of what is actually going on in the world of teaching and learning, and whether policies have improved or weakened those connections. For example, the Report does not discuss the question of whether the current pattern of honors degrees is persuasive evidence for the survival of older standards of teaching and learning, or whether the common academic standards that the Committee wants to defend even exist any longer. Nor is there reference to the decline, perhaps near disappearance, of the individual or small group tutorials that were formally provided by staff outside and in addition to the formal curriculum in a number of universities, and not just Oxbridge. Nor does the Report acknowledge the steady growth in the numbers of part-time teachers, a casual labor force that changes the character of institutions, and the relations of other academics to administrators and each other. The easy rhetoric of the Report successfully evades difficult problems. For example, the Report ventures to reflect on the essence of higher education:

``We sought to identify what is distinctive about learning at the higher level. We heard that it can be defined as the development of understanding and the ability to apply knowledge in a range of situations. This requires information and the opportunity to engage in 'learning conversations' with staff and other students in order to understand and be able to use new concepts in a particular field. A successful student will be able to engage in an effective discussion or debate with others in that field, relying on a common understanding of terms, assumptions,

questions, modes of argument, and the body of evidence."
(8.6)

Here is the familiar sound of traditional British higher education, shaping mind and sensibility, cultivating independent judgment through 'learning conversations' in a learning community. That roughly describes the shared set of goals and values in the elite universities that comprised British higher education up to, say, 1980. But the long Conservative Government made it clear in the most powerful ways -- by cutting budgets -- that traditional forms of higher education were not only not adequate for the prosperity and future of the U.K., but were very likely part of the problem of Britain's supposed decline, or at least relative decline.

Instead of asking what is distinctive about "learning at the higher level," as if it were all sufficiently alike to be captured in a few sentences, the Committee might more fruitfully have asked: "What kinds of education can we offer in the UK at average student/staff ratios of 20:1? What is the actual range of variation in that crucial indicator of support, and what parallel variation can be sketched in the forms and character of teaching and learning in this country?" The Report constantly shies away from genuinely engaging in the quite substantial differences between elite, mass and universal access education, and the sensitive issue of whether it wants to or can countenance differences in support levels associated with those different forms. But without disaggregating the system, discussions of its average character become nearly meaningless. On the one hand, at the level of ideals we hear the familiar elite goals and values; when the Report talks in more detail, we find ourselves much closer to the managed and more vocationally linked world of the post-1992 universities. Dearing, and perhaps the nation more generally, has never fully accepted that it has created a system of mass higher education with both continuing elite survivals and rapidly growing forms and institutions of open access. And this genuinely diverse system is hobbled in its development by broad statements of expectation and support, rules and policies that apply to all equally.

These broad generalized statements of advice and expectation are put most sharply in the following: "In pursuit of a national strategy of excellence, we are convinced that the enhancement and promotion of learning and teaching must be a priority for all of higher education."
(8.6) But "a national policy of excellence", whatever that may be beyond the exhortation, functions to assert a common character and mission for colleges and universities that is no longer true of the institutions that make up Britain's system of mass higher education. The exhortation, as empty as it may seem, has the serious consequence of

denying the realities of diversity, of concealing the profound differences among institutions and students. The real challenge is to identify and accept the diversity of the system, and begin to develop policies that both reflect and encourage that diversity. And among those policies would be a major devolution of authority and power out of central government and its funding instruments, to individual institutions or groups of similar and associated institutions. Among those powers would be the power to set their own costs of tuition, their own salary schedules, their own standards for awarding their degrees and certificates.

An Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

When the Report recommends a concrete instrument for the achievement of its aims in teaching and learning, it repeats the recent history of British government policies for higher education: centrally organized and common responses to varying and particularized problems.

Recommendation 13 reads "that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop or seek access to programmes for teacher training of their staff, if they do not have them, and that all institutions seek national accreditation of such programmes from the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education." (p. 126)

"The functions of the Institute would relate to the enhancement of learning and teaching and fall into three major categories:

- * the accreditation of teacher education programmes , , , ;
- * research and development in learning and teaching;
- * stimulation of innovation in learning and teaching" (8.66)

The Report makes a bow to the diversity of teaching styles and students by noting that a scheme to accredit teachers in higher education "will need to recognize that different types of students at different institutions have distinctly different learning needs. It will also have to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the brilliant but unorthodox teachers who do not fit conventional definitions of good teaching." (8.58) But the very way in which these reservations are put makes clear that the authors see the "brilliant but unorthodox teachers" as a rare breed for whom exceptions from standard practice can be made. Moreover, it is hard to imagine a national scheme that can take into account the variety of students with their "distinctly different learning needs," as if those needs themselves were clear and static.

But what is most troubling here, and this is consistent with much else in the Report, is the readiness to create new national bodies that purport to possess the secrets of "teaching and learning" and are prepared to judge the teaching performance of every university teacher in every kind of institution against criteria that the national bodies themselves define and embody. "We believe that the necessary recognition of teaching in higher education will only be achieved through a national scheme of teacher accreditation to which all institutions voluntarily commit." To that end the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) would "accredit training and practice, and recognize excellence in teaching at higher levels of recognised status." Moreover, "to encourage teaching of the highest quality, the Institute would confer associate membership, membership and fellowship to recognise superior levels of expertise." (8.61)

I doubt that the creation of yet another national body to assess "teaching and learning" across the board is a good trade-off for a radical decline in resources. Yet it is clear that the obsessive concern by central government and its creatures over the past decade with standards, qualifications, assessment and accreditation in British higher education arises out of anxieties about the impact of these cuts on the quality of teaching and research that formerly could be assumed. Moreover, the creation of such an Institute involves a commitment of further resources spun off from the institutions themselves into this new Institute with its own staff. And this staff will have or shortly acquire its own notions of what constitutes "effective teaching", notions that become orthodoxies. This staff, armed with the power to accredit or not accredit programs, and to grant differing degrees of membership to members, will almost certainly be a body of specialists who themselves do not teach main-line courses, but who will preach and enforce (so far as possible) "principles" of "good teaching." Indeed, accreditation of this kind assumes the existence of clear criteria for effective teaching across the board; the very terms of the recommendation assumes that these criteria will be applied in the course of accreditation of programs and individual teachers.

No one can object to the provision of help for teachers and graduate students in the arts of teaching offered by small groups of specialists inside colleges and universities. Such centers for teaching, whatever they may be called, have a legitimate place in our institutions. They can be close to the teaching staff, sensitive to differences among teachers and students, able to consult and advise without the obligation or authority to assess or accredit teaching. Centers for teaching as they exist in many institutions currently do not assume the existence of

such standard criteria, but accept that they have to learn about the unique circumstances associated with teaching different subjects, the styles of different teachers, the problems and resources associated with students of different talents and motivations. But that is not the spirit of this proposed National Institute of Teaching and Learning, charged with defining criteria appropriate to all, or nearly all, and judging teachers' effectiveness - on what evidence? Again, one size fits all; again the turn to national solutions for diverse problems; again the implicit denial of fundamental differences among the now immensely varied forms of postsecondary education.

Common Standards and External Examiners

The creation of national bodies with common criteria across the board flows naturally from an inability to accept genuine diversity of institutions -- of form, function, and standard -- in British higher education. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the Report's recommended mission for yet another national agency, the Quality Assurance Agency, to "assure the quality of higher education provision and the standards of its awards". On Dearing's recommendation, this agency would create and manage a "strengthened external examiner system" (10.93) to enforce a system of common standards across all institutions and departments. This renewed commitment to a "gold standard" of "quality" reminds us of King Canute's firm instructions to the incoming tide. A common standard of performance and achievement does not exist in British higher education today, and has not for many years, if it ever has. The notion that it does, and efforts to sustain it, are the object of derisory comment by every academic and academic administrator with whom I have spoken.

The issue is not whether standards in one place are higher or lower than in another, but rather that they are so profoundly different that they cannot be measured against the same yardstick. And that is the essence of mass higher education. It is not that the myriad courses and programs that are offered in British colleges and universities cannot be assessed, but they can only be assessed against their own criteria, and by people close to them who can know what those criteria are and how they are being pursued.

The demand for "common standards" is another bit of empty rhetoric, involving the invention and adoption of "national codes of practice" (10.68) and explicit statements by each institution "about the content of, and terminal standards for, the awards they offer" (10.68). The demand for the enforcement of "common standards" leads to more substantial mischief, notably a "strengthened external examiner system." (10.93). The Quality Assurance Agency

(QAA) is to "assure the quality of higher education provision and the standards of its awards." It is to attempt this impossible task in a variety of ways, not least through "the creation of a UK-wide pool of recognised academic staff from which all universities and other degree-awarding institutions must select external examiners. Examiners should be academics of high standing and integrity who are sufficiently specialized within degree disciplines. The pool could be created through nomination by institutions of appropriately qualified staff, with a small panel -- managed by the Agency -- to approve the inclusion of any individual on the nationally recognised list." (10.93) It is not clear whether the "academics of high standing" who are nominated would, as we said in the services, be "volunteered" by their institutions, or whether they would be permitted to decline the honor, perhaps out of an excess of modesty.

These examiners would examine in every department in every institution in the country, and unlike current practice, already fast breaking down, they would not serve simply at the invitation of the host institution, but on assignment by the Agency. The relationship between host department and examiner would not be direct, but would be vetted and managed by the Agency. The Agency, moreover, would accept responsibility for the quality and preparation of the examiners.

"The remit of the external examiner will need to be consistent across the UK, necessitating thorough familiarization, training and preparation, including a trainee/apprentice model for new external examiners." (These "apprentices" are in their other lives "academics of high standing" who now will be instructed in how to do assessments of teaching in their own subjects to the standards of the Agency and its professional staff.) "Examiners will need to be fully aware of the aims, teaching methods and approach of programmes under examination. This will require considerable interaction with departments to develop familiarity with entire programmes and how they are constructed from modules throughout the various levels." (10.94) So the examiners are not merely reading scripts and reviewing honors degrees, but will now in some way be assessing whole courses and programmes. Moreover, the Report's assumption that programmes are "constructed from modules" in a stable and coherent way runs contrary to my experience, either in the UK or the US. But as in much else associated with national standards, rhetoric can be made substitute for reality.

But it is not all rhetoric; there is a hard reality about this front-line service. "The extended external examiner remit involves additional resources. [That is to say, a further tax on the student/staff ratios and other

resources going into teaching and research]. Institutions will need to release members of staff for extended periods of time throughout the academic year, possibly up to 60 working days a year. For experienced academics to devote such a substantial period to external examiner duties, there must be full institutional cooperation and reward for the individuals. The duties could be linked to a period of research or scholarship time so that the individuals are not concerned about being out of date when returning to regular duties. Appointments as external examiners should be for no more than three years in any five-year cycle, with phased exits. External examiners should come together, say in groups of three to five, to review independently a range of papers against standards." (10.95)

This scheme is unrealistic for more reasons than I can enumerate.⁶ But it does reveal a deep unfamiliarity with the nature of colleges and universities, and how they and the people in them function. If the work of external examiners is to have any real effect on any group being assessed, the examiners have to be respected by their hosts. I doubt if examiners so recruited, trained and assigned would have the confidence of departments and programmes to whom they are posted and where they are examining. Moreover, those examiners who come out of the Agency's pool are not only reviewing scripts and assessing programmes, but are also reporting to the Agency, which will then decide on steps to take to defend national standards -- and that must be a source of tension between examiners and the programmes being examined.

But the sheer amount of resources committed to this operation staggers me. There is no awareness in the Report of the fine specialization of academic studies and courses, and the diversity of work even within disciplines. The sub-disciplines are the true units of academic work, and there are many more of them, and fewer practitioners of each, than there are disciplines. When we add the growing number of interdisciplinary courses, it is clear that the map of knowledge is too wide and varied to be managed and assessed in this way; intellectual life in colleges and universities can no longer be controlled or monitored by any central agency. It is precisely the Report's lack of understanding of the nature of academic life that leads to this kind of managerial illusion. Universities and colleges are not simply extensions of secondary schools, with a defined and limited range of studies and courses. Academic life is

⁶ As John Wakeford has noted, the Committee seems to be unaware of the nature of the academic calendar by implying that the work of examining can be spread evenly over the academic year. But actually it is compressed into one or possibly two short periods at the end of terms, which greatly complicates the logistics of this national effort, and probably also the size of the pool.

continually bursting out of any pre-defined boundaries, never more than just now. That is just what makes centralized efforts to manage and control intellectual life hopeless. But when those efforts are armed with the power of the state, they are also costly and destructive. British higher education has been paying those costs and suffering those injuries for some time now, which may be why it finds this Report and its recommendations so familiar.

The Report mercifully does not estimate the number of examiners required in any given year. Its off-hand remark about the need to release these "experienced academics of high standing" for up to 60 days a year gives one pause, and should give academic administrators even greater pause. But did the authors think through the implications of these suggestions? Do they believe that people can interrupt their courses and research in these ways for periods of from three to five years? The assumptions themselves, for me, throw all their remarks about "teaching and learning" into doubt. What can these authors know about "teaching and learning" if they can make these suggestions? And quite apart from the task itself -- to impose common standards on academic subjects many of which are rapidly changing and becoming more specialized, more diverse, less definable -- is the readiness to take some of the relatively few experienced academics of high standing out of their classrooms and laboratories for significant periods, and to imagine this can be done without negative effects on the quality of an institution's academic work. The irony is that this recommendation, remote from the realities of academic life, would in practice surely weaken the quality of the work whose standards it is designed to defend and preserve.

Conclusion

The Dearing Report is heavily constrained by its perceived necessity to be "relevant" -- i.e. not to make recommendations that will be dismissed out of hand by the Government of the day, a constraint that reflects its character as a civil service document rather than a document by an independent body that might have had less to lose by more radical recommendations. It is perhaps unjust that even its extremely cautious recommendations on finance seem to be dismissed by the Government to which it made its Report.

But with all my strictures, I might end by pointing to some areas where I think the Report has contributed to the discussion about British higher education.

1. First, by issuing its Report it has engendered a discussion; or looked at differently, it effectively

inhibited the discussion while it was sitting, and effectively took the issue out of the political arena. That is a survival of the old belief, held by British academics and politicians alike, that higher education is too complex, too arcane, too remote from the interests of ordinary voters to be brought into the rough and tumble of general election campaigns. That is a survival of elite attitudes into an age of mass higher education. Mass higher education inevitably becomes of interest to a mass electorate. And British universities and colleges may now be more popular, their health of greater concern, in the country than it is in Whitehall or Westminster -- though that is debatable. I do not see it as in the interests of higher education to have agreed to take itself out of the campaign, and effectively out of politics, which is what this Committee was appointed to do and did. Nevertheless, the Report, by having views and recommendations on just about everything, has put many aspects of higher education on the table for discussion and debate, and that itself is good.

2. I think the introduction of payments by full-time university students for some part of their higher education is long overdue; and Dearing has made it now the conventional wisdom. I also appreciate the efforts the Committee has made to think about how that might be done, though on the whole I don't much like their solutions; with Nicholas Barr I tend to prefer something closer to a system of variable fees determined (and retained) by the universities with loans repaid on an income contingent basis, somewhat along Australian lines.

3. I think the Report is right in assuming that information technology will be having great effects on higher education in the near and medium future, though no one now, and that includes this Committee and its advisers, can know what those effects will be. But the Report might have confessed its inability to predict the course of this rapidly developing set of forces, and raised the question of how best to plan in the context of uncertainty. But the Report cannot allow itself to confess ignorance in a social context in which many things are unknown or unclear. To assume, as it does, a "saving" of 200 million pounds nearly two decades from now arising out of the introduction of IT into higher education is just funny.

4. The Report is also right to stress the growing importance of further education, of mature and part-time students, and of distance learning. The Report is less successful in its failure to think through the relationship between FE and higher education, or to see that a broad system of higher education in the UK must include FE and distance learning along with the colleges and universities.

But Dearing, like all national policies, is successful in inverse relation to the diversity of its object. One can imagine a system of repayments that attach to all students who are similar in their leaving university with a debt that must be repaid in some fashion. The wisdom of its specific recommendations on tuition and loans are of course debatable, but they are at least appropriate to the problem. But the Report's assumption of common funding and educational policies for a hundred and eighty universities and colleges, which differ in quite fundamental ways, makes less sense. And policies for the teaching and learning of many different academic subjects affecting thousands of teachers and over a million students of all sizes, shapes, ages and talents are reduced in this Report mostly to platitudes and calls for greater effort.

In my view, the single biggest failure of the Report lies in its ignorance about the evolving nature and diversity of British higher education, and its ignorance of its ignorance. What follows from that double ignorance is its complete failure to recognize the importance of a good knowledge base and a deep understanding of the dynamic trends in the institutions. And not knowing what it doesn't know, Dearing makes no recommendations to fill that gap with a program of ongoing research into the realities and trends of British higher education, based in an independent unit which would have that kind of policy-oriented research as its central mission. Very little of that kind of research is currently being carried on in the UK, and even less is supported by Government agencies. The consequences of that failure can be read in this Report.

Many years ago I suggested that the important question for a system of elite colleges and universities is "What should we do?" while the central question to ask of mass education is "What's going on?" This Report, in those large sections which address the private life of higher education, the life of teaching and learning, simply does not know what is going on inside the colleges and universities, their classrooms and offices and laboratories, but still pronounces on what should be happening there with an air of great authority. But policy based on ignorance is bad policy: not only does it not achieve its ends, but it is likely to have a range of unintended and undesired effects which the next round of policy will have to try to remove or amend. This pattern, of policy by intent rather than through an assessment of probable outcomes, was the habit and practice of the long Thatcher-Major Government, which did its policy analysis by trial and error, expensive to the institutions and to education more generally. In this as in so much else, not least in its continuing resistance to an awareness of the diversity and complexity of higher education, and its consequent commitment to dirigisme, to tight controls from the center. Dearing is a true child of

Thatcher/Major. It remains to be seen how much of that child will be adopted by their successors.

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