

‘Whither Higher Education?’ An Economic Perspective for the Dearing Committee of Inquiry

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Extract

I. Context

‘...Higher Education has a vital role to play in raising the levels of the nation’s skills and competitiveness and thus enhancing our capacity to generate wealth and improve our quality of life. The National Committee of Inquiry will make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education should develop to meet the needs of the UK over the next twenty years...’

Secretary of State for Education and Employment

10 May 1996

Higher education in the United Kingdom has expanded at an increasing rate since the 1970s, particularly over the period 1989/90 to 1994/5 during which there was a 61% increase in higher education enrolments.¹

Whereas just 10% of school leavers participated in higher education (HE) in the early 1970s, in the 1990s more than 30% now go on to higher education. The profile of the student population has also changed.

Women, mature students and part timers make up an increasing proportion of all students in HE and the academic background of students has become more diverse, with increasing numbers taking the GNVQ route into higher education. Meanwhile concerns about resourcing have multiplied, staff to student ratios have fallen and the CVCP estimated that between 1989/90 and 1994/95 public funding fell by 25% per student. It is against this background that the UK Government has commissioned Sir Ron Dearing’s Review of Higher Education.

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