

Foreword

– **Baroness Perry of Southwark**

There has probably never been any period when higher education has faced so much turbulence and change as it is now experiencing. One need only to reflect on the changes to funding arrangements, the encouragement of a new range of alternative private providers, the creation of a new Office for Students, the plans for teaching assessments and the continuing challenge of visa regulations for foreign students, to realise that those who lead institutions, and those who write about higher education, need to be well prepared and organised to respond to all these issues if Universities as we know them are to survive. As Emran Mian comments in one of the essays in this collection, ‘the scope for disruption is underestimated within the sector as well as inside government’.

It is therefore most welcome to find a collection of such thoughtful, considered and at times passionate essays dealing with so many of the topics which the system must address.

Throughout each essay is the recognition that government has encroached further and further on the autonomy of universities, and with the new legislation will move even closer. From the happy days when the Universities Funding Council was set up with a casual memo from the Treasury as a buffer between government and academe, we now have a government which controls the distribution of research money, controls pricing, regulates the market for students

from overseas and, as it moves into the assessment of teaching, will inevitably intrude into many detailed aspects of university life.

The White Paper proposals for teaching assessment form a substantial part of the comments in this collection. A thoughtful critique of the proposals is made by Alison Goddard in her essay on a teaching revolution, with a salutary look at the experience of other countries. Louisa Darian's essay deals directly with the difficulty of finding the right – and appropriate – data for assessing universities. She rightly points out the inadequacy of much of what is currently used in league tables, which widely determine student choice. Forebodingly, however, she argues that teaching quality can only be reliably assessed by visits to classrooms, and I am pleased that she is quick to acknowledge the threat to academic autonomy of such a move.

Len Shackleton's analysis of the real benefit of a free academic element in national life makes a powerful case for government undertaking a 'substantial withdrawal' from interference. His excellent argument for government looking for ways to increase competition rather than control pricing is a theme of many of the essays here.

Three of the essays deal with the issue of returns from higher education for students. Harry Patrinos offers analysis of the latest estimates and makes the case for expansion of higher education provision based on a fair and sustainable cost-recovery model at the university level based on future earnings. One of the options outlined by Patrinos – an equity-based risk-sharing model, by which universities take a stake in graduates human capital and, thereby, their future earnings – is explored further by Peter Ainsworth. Ainsworth finds this the 'only workable solution' for

ensuring that quality and relevance for employability are prioritised, and that both price flexibility and access for all may be guaranteed, across the range of subjects, without students having to pay up-front. Meanwhile, reflecting on a central paradox of the graduate job market – of graduates finding no employment fitting their education, while employers complain of the skills shortage at graduate level – Nima Sanandaji makes a fresh case for the development of more integrated continuing adult education.

The planned expansion of institutions through the granting of degree-awarding powers to new alternative providers is examined in the essay of Emran Mian. If the new providers are of high quality – and some prestigious US universities have expressed an initial interest – and if they are situated in geographically underprovided regions, then they must be welcomed. But if their offerings are of less than excellent in quality, and they attract mainly students from disadvantaged backgrounds, then this could only increase the divide between the least and most fortunate in our society.

All together, this collection of essays is both timely and welcome. It is my belief that the academic world has failed over many decades, to address the question of just where the proper dividing line between government and university autonomy should be drawn. Government funds – in one way or another – much of the total university spend. Government has a legitimate concern that public money is well and appropriately spent. What level of regulation, and what level of trust, should government then exercise? This collection is a start in addressing that question.

Those of us who have worked in higher education should have used the expertise of the professors and teachers in our

institutions to address that question long ago. One can only hope that it is not too late for an informed debate between the academic world and government to begin.

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