

Exclusive interview

Julia King: Defending the Browne Report principles

October 2010 saw the publication of the report of the Independent Review for Higher Education Funding and Student Finance and the broad adoption of its assumptions by the coalition government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

GMT's Aphrodite Papadatou grills Browne panel member Julia King on the report's principles and her visions about the future of English higher education.¹

[To what extent are we seeing the marketisation of English higher education \(HE\)?](#)

We are seeing the marketisation of HE to an extent, but I don't believe this to be either a new thing, or a bad thing. The process of marketisation is already in place, and in this respect the Browne recommendations are in line with the present system's trajectory. However competition (between institutions) for teaching is not currently very strong in this country – certainly not as strong as research – and in this respect the acceleration of the marketisation of higher education represents a progressive change.

Today, there are relatively few institutions which are able to balance innovation and excellence in teaching with excellence in research. Unless we find a way to increase funding for universities in England, our strong international reputation for undergraduate education will be eroded at an accelerating pace. Our proposed funding model, building on from the present model, is therefore aimed at enabling and encouraging universities to enhance the quality of teaching.

¹ Julia King CBE FEng is the Vice-Chancellor of Aston University. Julia has held key senior positions in Rolls Royce, and a number of senior public appointments, including heading the 2007 King Review. Most recently, she was appointed panel member of the Independent Review for Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, headed by Lord Browne of Madingley.

Do you see this as representing a fundamental foundational change to the English HE system, or would you describe it as a natural evolution?

The simple answer is no. Browne's proposals represent an evolution of the present system in terms of enhancing teaching quality, increasing participation, increasing diversity in student choice, and enhancing fair access. However, we do propose a radically different funding structure with the aim of preserving and enhancing the best aspects of the existing HE system: diversity; teaching; research. By diversity I mean the diversity in such aspects as course choice, course structure, mode of delivery and length that increases HE's marketisation drive in line with student demand. We are optimistic that, if the Browne recommendations are adopted in the form intended, then the English higher education system will witness a growth of course types and access routes, which will cater for an increasingly diverse student population.

This will give more freedom for non-standard students, for example those in employment, or those caring for family members, mature students etc – to access the qualifications of their choice. The Browne report proposals also envisage a growth in student numbers – enabling all those with the potential to benefit to access higher education, thus meeting our advanced economy's need for an increasing number of graduates.

The proposals are designed to strengthen the reputation and quality of the English higher education system by giving universities more money to invest in learning and teaching, and by providing pressure through student choice to improve the student learning experience and increase the diversity of provision.

How can a balance be achieved between the need for institutions to develop a viable, sustainable funding base and supporting participation amongst risk-averse student groups?

We hope that the principles of the Browne review will be absolutely adhered to. The most important messages we have to get across are that no one will have to pay upfront for their university education and that the repayment of loans will only begin when graduates can afford to start repaying their loans. In the report we propose that a graduate should be earning £21,000 before they start repaying their loans, and then at a rate of 9% of income over this figure, so a graduate on £25,000 would be paying £7 a week. At present graduates start repaying their loans when they earn over £15,000.

In this sense the system is designed to work to support participation amongst risk-averse student groups. Poorer students will not have to worry about repayments – that is, not until they earn enough to be able to afford repayments. You only have to repay your loan when (and only if) you are experiencing the economic benefit of your university education. At the point of access, education higher education remains free.

Our funding proposal is therefore a very progressive one. It represents a no-risk approach. Our proposed loan is not one that can come back and ‘bite’ you, like commercial loans and credit cards will if you don’t pay them off. There is no stigma attached to not paying back in full your fee and maintenance loans if you don’t earn enough – indeed our modelling and calculations indicated that only about 40% of graduates would pay back their loans in full.

This is how the system should work, this is the public contribution for the cost of higher education. In addition, as the economic situation allows, I believe that it is critical that governments are as generous as they can be in supporting students.

It is very important that prospective students understand the funding situation at pre-entry level; for only by disseminating this information to young people – at an early stage – can we continue to enhance participation amongst potentially risk-averse student groups. Potential students must be able to make independent and informed decisions.

How do you think HE institutions will regulate fair access?

There will be more innovative outreach activities. At Aston we have a strong outreach programme with local schools, including primary schools, because we want even the youngest children to think of university as a normal part of their education. Our undergraduates get involved in mentoring local school students through our extensive volunteering programme. We run summer schools, especially in STEM subjects, and projects to encourage students from low participation neighbourhoods to consider careers in the professions. Other universities do similar things. Across the sector we will be looking at different sorts of bursary schemes to attract and support students.

One of the major actions we are taking is sponsoring a 14-19 Academy School, the Aston University Engineering Academy, which will be opening in September 2012, teaching the Engineering Diploma, with a modern foreign language, to widen participation in engineering. I am confident we will see a range of new and innovative activities aimed at increasing participation and funded, at least in part, by the increased fee income. In the Browne report we indicate the need to strengthen the agreements to encourage widening participation, especially for those universities charging fees above £6,000.

How will the government regulate fair access, and how might institutions become involved in providing information and guidance to potential students?

The Office of Fair Access is currently in place to do this and our proposals propose a strengthening of the approach. The activities mentioned about and the outcomes in terms of widening participation – looked at against a set of appropriate benchmarks.

Activities to provide information and guidance are likely to take the form of open days, conferences, networks, pre-entry guidance, and career guidance as part of the summer schools, etc. The recent legislative development in career guidance – specifically the setting up of the new ‘all-age career service’ – will be something that university careers services will be able to collaborate with.

Apart from STEM** and SIV* subjects, there does not appear to be any government ‘protection’ of a broad base of subjects. What is your view of this?

I don’t look at it this way at all. What the Browne report proposals do, and what I think the Government is intending to do, is to ensure that expensive subjects which are critical to growing the economy, like STEM subjects, are no more expensive for students to study at university than any other subject.

Is there an expectation that employers will part-fund the participation of part-time HE students?

Some employers already provide support for part-time participation, and I hope that they will continue to do so, and that more will do so in the future.

Do you think that there will be changes in methods of learning and teaching as a result of the Browne recommendations?

The Browne recommendations are intended to drive innovation and I am sure that this is what they will do. I am sure there will be greater and better use of learning technologies, more distance learning, and more innovative use of virtual learning environments. Young people are now much more engaged with new communications technologies and are much more internet savvy than earlier generations, and learn in different ways, so we are likely to see more alternatives to conventional lectures. There will be more diversity in how courses are delivered.

The Browne recommendations are not specifically aimed at making the provision of education cheaper, but better.

I very much hope that there will indeed be a lot of changes in methods of teaching and learning and I am optimistic that technology will play an important part in this – but so will people, including innovative academics!

What do you think HE will look like ten years from now?

I hope that once the present economic situation improves the government will be able to look at improving student support/financing. Teaching will be back up the higher education agenda, with improved quality, rather in the way that the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise has improved the quality of research. We need to make sure that more is done to celebrate teaching.

What do you believe would be the implications of the Browne recommendations on postgraduate study? The report doesn’t address this question in great depth.

We didn’t see a major need to change the current funding and provision for postgraduate study. Our priority was the provision of recommendations for improving the quality of, and enhancing access to, undergraduate education. Postgraduate research was not within our remit.

However, the changes at undergraduate level could have an impact on postgraduate study in the future, and this is something that needs to be monitored, so that action can be taken if necessary.

*Strategically important and vulnerable

** Science, technology, engineering and maths.