

GMT interview

Adding fuel to the fire – HEPI stokes the HE debate

with Nick Hillman

Policy debates in UK higher education (HE) have been interesting in recent years and there appear to be no signs of them fizzling out. In this interview Nick Hillman¹, Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), tells us more about the lack of legislation to put students at the heart of the system and why he believes young people do not have enough guidance. How can HEPI help us understand current policy issues facing the HE sector?

Imagine yourself five years from now, what would you like to have achieved at HEPI by then?

I would like us to have done two things in particular. First, we will hopefully have helped to improve the political debate on higher education. We can't do that alone, of course, but we can help shape the environment in which the higher education debate takes place – and it does need improving. When I worked for the Coalition, political colleagues would sometimes say we couldn't do X or Y because, however evidence-based it might be, 'the optics' would look bad. Meanwhile, the Opposition have spent four years telling people they might introduce a graduate tax after the next election without ever explaining how it would work. No political party is currently making a clear commitment to new higher education legislation after the next election, yet those at the frontline believe it is necessary, so again they have got off the hook. I start from the belief that politicians in all parties want the best for the country and it is our job in think-tank land to help them get there without too much buffeting.

Secondly, I want us to inject new evidence into the higher education debate. We have recently begun to look closely at the Australian higher education system, which is very similar to ours in many ways – for example, they have income-contingent student loans and have undergone a comparable debate about international students. There are likely to be positive and negative lessons for us from their experiences that we would be unwise to ignore. In government, I never came across anyone who understood how the

Australian higher education system worked and so it's good to start there before moving further afield. Our annual academic experience survey² is another way in which we have added to the existing evidence base rather than simply transmitted it.

There is heated debate about the likely effects of the 2012 financial arrangements on students, what do you think are the important effects for institutions?

The most important short-term effect has been to protect institutions' finances. At a macro-level, the sector has been insulated compared to other publicly-financed services. A recent report by HEFCE found operating surpluses of £1 billion, a 46 per cent increase in capital spending and increased discretionary reserves of £12.3 billion³. No wonder Universities UK have recently said 'We do not need the system to be uprooted in the short term and replaced with something new'⁴ However, all is not rosy in the garden. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, we are only 40 per cent through the cuts⁵ and no party is currently offering to protect the higher education budget. The student numbers cap is due to be removed just as the next wave of austerity bites after the next election, so there is a real threat to the unit of resource. Some individual institutions are finding life tougher than in the past, as they find themselves squeezed by more prestigious institutions that Hoover up applicants and also from new alternative providers that are cheaper. Moreover, unless we can resolve the tortuous debates on international students, foreign students coming here to study may not proffer such a useful safety cushion in the future.

Do you envisage that prospective UK students will increasingly look to universities overseas in order to avoid loan debt?

Yes I do think UK citizens will increasingly look abroad for their higher education and that's almost certainly a good thing, though not necessarily for the reasons people think. We Brits are not always good at immersing ourselves in other people's cultures and

¹ Nick Hillman is the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) having previously worked as Special Adviser to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

² Soilemetzidis, L., Bennett, P., Buckley, A., Hillman, N. and Stoakes, G. (2014) The HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014. York: HEA

³ HEFCE (2014) Financial health of the higher education sector: 2012-13 financial results and 2013-14 forecasts. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201402/name,85561,en.html

⁴ Clark, P (2014) One year until UK general election 2015 – what's at stake for higher education. Universities UK blog. Posted on 7 May 2014. Available from: blog.universitiesuk.ac.uk/

⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014) IFS Green Budget Press Release. 5th February 2014. Available at: www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7086

going to study abroad is an excellent way to build the sort of transferable skills and international outlook that adds richness to people's lives and which employers want. But it does not necessarily make a student's financial position better. Going to study in Holland or Germany may be cheap – or even free – in terms of tuition, but you can't currently take your maintenance loan or maintenance grant with you, so you have to cover your own travel and living costs and you don't have to pay your fees upfront to study in the UK anyway. There are generous scholarships available for the very best applicants at the American Ivy League universities, and the Sutton Trust are easing the route somewhat for UK citizens to secure them. But the number available is tiny, so that will remain an exceptional route and is unlikely to become a driver of public policy.

You raised an important issue in your blog 'Are careers advisers wrong?' about the use of data; can there ever be too much data in the public domain?

I spoke at a careers' advisers convention in Manchester and was shocked by the attitude of some people present. They insisted that more schoolchildren from disadvantaged backgrounds are being put off higher education than in the past but just would not engage with the data, which do not support such an assertion. It worries me that they made the claim so vehemently because I fear it might skew the advice they give young people and because it stopped us from having a proper conversation about where problems do exist, such as in the take-up of part-time and postgraduate study. That is why I wrote about it and asked for feedback on the new Debate section of the HEPI website⁶. I am instinctively in favour of transparency for educational data so long as people's right to anonymity is maintained and so long as the data are set in context. But too often young people are besieged by data when they actually need someone to hold their hand and guide them. The differences between information, advice and guidance are not always remembered in the nooks and crannies of Whitehall.

What insight does the HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience survey offer in comparison to the National Student Survey?

Where do I start? The biggest single difference is that the National Student Survey only includes final-year students. So it does not yet cover a single undergraduate paying £9,000 fees. It also does not delve sufficiently deeply into the teaching and learning environment. Our survey includes questions on class

size, attendance, time spent working with friends, placements and academic study during vacations. This year, for the first time, we have added questions about the overall well-being of students, which suggest we may need to alter the caricature of students as carefree and happy-go-lucky: on average they are less content than the population as a whole. I think of the survey as a microscope suspended above institutions and students to find out exactly what they are up to.

If you could make three policy imperatives for the 2015 election campaign, what would they be?

I would like there to be a much deeper understanding about the value of legitimate international students to the UK. Even those politicians who claim they understand the economic, cultural and educational benefits of international students often end up using the Home Office's language on bringing the 'brightest and the best' here. Blocking any individual who genuinely wants to come to study from spending lots of money before going home again, while leaving a useful imprint behind, is irrational. As a nation, we are good at all sorts of education and we should not limit ourselves to educating future Einsteins.

Secondly, I would like there to be a commitment from all three major political parties to a new higher education landscape. The funding of higher education has been transformed but the regulation hasn't caught up. My first pamphlet for HEPI, *Unfinished Business*, highlighted how the Coalition have failed to deliver their promised 'level playing-field' for higher education providers and concluded that we have 'an unkempt meadow' instead⁷. I hope that when legislation does appear, it will have students' interests at its heart.

Thirdly, I would like to see a bit more sense about the value of education among the candidates of all parties and among the leadership of the minor parties. The current leaderships of the three main political parties seem to understand the value of a broad-based higher education system but individuals within those parties and the leadership of the minor parties, such as the Greens and UKIP, too often resort to overly simplistic policies, such as abolishing fees and slashing the number of students. Even before the 2015 general election, we have the vitally important referendum on Scottish independence. HEPI has recently held an essay-writing competition about the impact of Scottish independence on higher education, which is designed to smoke out any particularly interesting views that may not have been heard to date.

For more information about HEPI and to read the full Student Academic Experience 2014 report go to the HEPI website: www.hepi.ac.uk

⁶ To access the Debate Section of the HEPI website go to: www.hepi.ac.uk/category/debate/

⁷ Hillman, N (2014) *Unfinished Business?: Higher education legislation* HEPI Report 65. Oxford: HEPI Available from: www.hepi.ac.uk/category/publications/