

Higher Education in context

Steve Besley's pragmatic revolution

Very few people would deny that the education sector is currently experiencing anything less than a whirlwind of change. On the other hand many would disagree on the nature of its effects. The Government's recent social mobility strategy sought to establish, not least of all, the principles behind the new Education Bill. In an exclusive interview with Aphrodite Papadatou Pearson Learning's Head of Policy, Steve Besley, puts the changes in HE and career guidance provision in their context.¹

AP: What do you think the Browne Review achieved?

S.B: As I see it, there are two points of view in terms of its effects - the political and the pragmatic.

Politically the Review yielded a crisis. There is a clear discrepancy between one half of the coalition government's perception of tuition fees and the Review's recommendations. However I do think this is a 'blip' - a resolvable situation which can be overcome; not least of all because the whole idea behind the present government is that it is one based – unavoidably so - on pragmatism.

In the same vein, the subtext of the Review too is based on pragmatism rather than on ideology. When asked in the recent Select Committee on what he wanted to achieve, Lord Browne pointed to three key components. First of all he wanted to galvanise and maintain an upwards mobility trend in participation and access in and to Higher Education. Secondly he wanted to ensure that quality remained in the forefront of what was happening. Quality, may I add here, is a vital factor in the way that HE is perceived - both as an internal product to people here in the UK and as a global commodity. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Lord Browne wanted to ensure that any changes in funding the sector would result to a sustainable system. Indeed he was very keen to produce a system that would not be outdated either in the near future, or in the decades to come.

Nonetheless this last 'pragmatic' component of the Review has a political dimension too. I believe Lord Browne wanted to prove that there is an alternative model in which public services can be delivered, whatever the ideological make up of the government. This model would shift the burden of responsibility from government and towards 'customers'. In this sense what Lord Browne was trying to achieve was something quite innovative. This is one of the reasons why his recommendations have proved so challenging.

I strongly believe that this very last point about innovation is the crux of the Brown report. Therein lays the power of its proposals.

AP: What was your initial reaction to the rationale behind the HE funding cuts and fee rises? Evolutionary or revolutionary? Partisan, or pragmatic?

S.B: My initial reaction was that the rationale is revolutionary, and I have not changed my mind since. A reason behind my reaction is the way in which the government has tried to attack many of the issues in HE (and in education in general). This is a whole new approach of how the sector is going to operate in the future. I don't think we have grasped the full entirety of its impact: Of how courses are going to be put on, of how customers can be incentivised, and of how they could operate in a marketised system. I think all this is quite revolutionary.

The second part of your question makes for a very interesting point. I think that even though the media have presented it as a partisan approach, the original view of its makers was that it was pragmatic. I remain to my view that it is such a rationale, underpinned by the idea that a higher education is an enormous good and commodity which must be possessed by as many people as possible. The best way to achieve this, it goes on to say, is not by overwhelming state subsidies but by a flexible and progressive system of student loans – this would ensure that universities respond to the needs of the customer rather than to government targets.

¹ Steve Besley is Head of Policy (UK and International) at Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning.

So the new funding model, in my view, is both revolutionary and pragmatic.

AP: In your opinion will Access Agreements (AAs) work to improve fair access?

S.B: I know that there has been a lot of discussion as to whether Access Agreements have any particular ‘teeth’ or whether they will have any impact over how much universities will charge. I personally think it is essential that there is an objective commitment that universities act to widen access and participation to the best of their abilities; and this is what AAs are.

In the context of a marketised system therefore, AAs may not have ‘teeth’ and will not force universities to charge a particular level of tuition fee; but what they will do is place responsibility on individual institutions to prioritise student retention, outreach work etc. They should provide a commitment that any fees charged over £6,000 must be spent on widening participation and access. It is difficult yet to say how much they will improve it, but I think they provide a very important public accountability mechanism.

On balance therefore I think that AAs are an essential component of the new fee system. Under the current arrangement, they will be reviewed annually. There is therefore a sense that they will constantly be updated and changed and thus have some impact.

AP: Government pledges to support different routes to professional employment, i.e. through increasing apprenticeships and improving the vocational system. What are your views on this?

S.B: My view on this is that this is an absolutely paramount route for entering HE. All evidence suggests that the high performing economies are those that have invested in high skill achievement for both their current and future workforces. In this sense I think it would be very wrong for British HE to turn its back on those skills and only demand for academic and research skills. Equally HE itself should provide a compelling route for those higher skill levels that are not necessarily seen as vocational or academic.

A lot of the work that is done in HE now is around technical skills; those for example used in high profile service industries. It is thus critically important that HE provides these skills too. Currently in Pearson we are working on developing vocational BTEC degrees; we are also doing a lot of work on higher level apprenticeships, and continuing to provide a route to HE through Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).

Interestingly our recent statistics show us that somewhere in the region of 90,000 people who entered university last year got in on the basis of BTEC qualifications, so a ‘different’ route already exists.

I therefore think that there is a route already there: Higher Education has an enormous capacity to up-skill and train people in a number of areas. At Pearson, we are hugely supportive of this.

AP: Employers and other supra-governmental stakeholders are expected to fill in the funding gap. How will this affect the quality of a higher education?

S.B: There is always a concern that when private providers fund areas of HE, then they will try to do so using the most efficient model and thus harm the quality of HE. I don’t necessarily go along with this line of thought. I believe that the first thing people look at when they are purchasing a higher education (unlike some other goods) is quality. Thus any attempt to lower or modify its quality would not survive for very long.

AP: How congruent are the HE reforms with the proposed school reforms?

S.B: In many ways there is a lot of congruence. The obvious example for this would be the government’s interest in the English Bacc (EB) which provides a template of the criteria that young people should have to gain HE access. Indeed the EB is built upon the set of criteria that the Russell Group identified earlier this year.² The government emphasises that young people must have the right core qualifications for progression into adult life; English and Maths stands out, both for the EB and the Wolf reforms.

As we understand it at Pearson these are very important prerequisites both for HE and employers.

AP: Do you think they will work well together to support the government’s social mobility agenda?

S.B: If I am not mistaken the government’s social mobility agenda focuses in inter-generational social mobility; that is it is trying to ensure that young people do not carry the same restrictions and barriers from one generation to the other.³ It wants to ensure that progression from childhood, to HE and adulthood is made easier from one generation to another. From the school perspective the main worry is that the EB will restrict the opportunity for access, since it focuses so clearly on the five core subjects

² For more on *Informed Choices in Post 16 Education* see our special feature in *Spring 2011 GMT*, (pp. 7-8)

³ You can download the *Social Mobility Strategy: Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* from www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

which not every young person will be able to achieve. However, when we take in mind provisions like the Pupil Premium, the long term objectives of social mobility should actually be increased by the strategy. It has got a series of indicators – and I believe there are two indicators for HE - that sit with the AAs to ensure that more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have an opportunity to access HE.

My overall view of the government's social mobility strategy is that it is quite a hard philosophy to pin down, but when put in practice it provides some practical mechanisms for ensuring that progression is very much at the forefront of what education is trying to achieve.

AP: What are your views on the new 'all-age' careers service?

S.B: Regrettably careers education has, for many years, been regarded as a 'Cinderella' service. This is very unfortunate as it is a very difficult undertaking – that is, to provide comprehensive careers advice and guidance and all that is related to it (advice on lifestyles, mobility etc) for people of all ages and at all stages of transition. As we all know, the government's view is that it should introduce an 'all-age' careers service by April 2012. However, as things stand, much of the service is being pared back as new structures are developed and as the Education Bill is debated.

My view is that it is absolutely critical that an 'all-age' career service is put in place, but it must be one that is based on using an application of modern technology: It must be a service that can read labour markets, understand skill needs, understand trends, and understand the way that young people (as Alison Wolf put it in her recent report) 'churn' for the first five or six years of their lives: They move in and out of different jobs, they dip in and out of training and employment, and so on.

So far the careers and guidance service has struggled to keep up with the ways in which young people's behaviour and the way in which the labour market operates. It now needs all the tools and mechanisms (and dare I say a bit of funding) to be able to do just that.

AP: In your opinion, is the education sector currently well equipped to deal with deep structural changes throughout its system?

S.B: In my view, yes it is ready, and I say that for two reasons:

First of all, the education system has already been through enormous structural change, it has survived, and it has coped with it extremely well. In my opinion it is very good at managing change, and I can say that across the whole sector.

Secondly, the majority of people who work in the education sector are very committed to it and want to do the best for people they are working with and for. When it comes to change, unlike popular concerns, people of the education sector generally thrive (even though they themselves sometimes don't see it that way). Perhaps more than any other area of public life, people of our sector actually adapt and adopt change to the benefit of those that matter.

I think there is a lot to be said for that.

AP: Finally, what does the future hold for Pearson Learning?

S.B: The future holds many exciting things for Pearson Learning.

In terms of pre-HE level education, we are helping schools understand the changes in the school curriculum. We are specifically offering the use of three tools: First of all we are providing schools with access to a range of new resources - both published and online. Secondly we are providing teachers with guidance and help so as to improve the lot of those working in education. Finally, we are developing technology to help teaching in the classroom.

In terms of HE, we are very excited about some of the changes there! As I mentioned earlier, we are working to develop BTEC degrees. Indeed we are very keen on supporting and encouraging a vocational route through to Higher Education.

Finally, for the college and technical (levels three and four) sector: We are revamping some of our qualifications, including our BTECs, to ensure that people who go through this route are equipped with the skills of the future.

At Pearson Learning we have now been presented with an enormous opportunity to help equip the workforce of the future, as well as to re-skill the workforce of today. We have taken on this challenge with full force.

*You can find out more about Pearson Learning at: www.pearson.com
You can also catch up with Steve on Twitter: www.twitter.com/Stevebesley*