

# Contemporary English higher education policy and the Robbins Report: continuity or change?

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This White Paper and the legislation already enacted are not about finding ‘fairer’ ways to pay for higher education or, in any meaningful sense, about putting ‘students at the heart of the system’. Rather, they represent the latest installment in the campaign to replace the assumptions of Robbins’s world with those of McKinsey’s.

Stefan Collini.<sup>1</sup>

Collini’s verdict on the June 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, is one of many damning criticisms made by academics of the contemporary government’s English higher education policy.<sup>2</sup> A common theme in these critiques is that the emphasis on ‘marketisation’ in present policy will threaten important values of higher education. However, government ministers have suggested that their reforms adhere to past principles, if certainly not to all elements of previous policy. In one speech, David Willetts, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, said that, in order to succeed, the reforms

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Collini, ‘From Robbins to McKinsey’.

<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n16/stefan-collini/from-robbins-to-mckinsey>> (3/01/12). McKinseys are a management consultancy firm whose unofficial motto is ‘everything can be measured, and what gets measured gets managed’. Also, see Stefan Collini, *What are Universities for?* (London, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Des Freedman, ‘The Assault on Universities: a Manifesto for Resistance’.

<<http://counterfire.org/index.php/articles/156-education/15199-the-assault-on-universities-a-manifesto-for-resistance>> (27/12/11); Anon., ‘Campaign for the Public University’.

<<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/about/>> (15/12/11).

had to ‘reinforce the core values of higher education’.<sup>3</sup> The White Paper suggests that it constitutes continuity: its foreword states that it ‘builds on’ the ‘proud history’ of the English university sector.<sup>4</sup> However, to academics such as Collini, contemporary policy threatens to replace the central ideas espoused by the 1963 Robbins report with those of business.<sup>5</sup> This essay will consider whether current reforms adhere to the aims and purposes of higher education set out by Robbins, which was described by one historian as ‘the constitution of modern British higher education’.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it will examine the extent to which current policy rejects that report’s principles and policies regarding how higher education should be funded and provided.

Robbins is cited by both the critics of present policy and contemporary politicians because of its enduring influence on higher education. In 1961, the government appointed the Robbins committee to review higher education and to advise which principles should underpin long-term policy.<sup>7</sup> When the report was presented in 1963, the government accepted its key premises and stated that Robbins’ ‘plans for expansion are being set in train at once’.<sup>8</sup> Compiled by a committee composed principally of academics and led by the economist Lionel Robbins, the report was ‘the product of an assured academic class’.<sup>9</sup> Although certain recommendations were rejected, two committee members reflected that ‘few official reports in British history... have led to such immediate changes in government policy’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Willetts, ‘HEFCE Annual Conference’.

[http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-hefce-annual-conference>\(02/01/12\).](http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-hefce-annual-conference>(02/01/12).)

<sup>4</sup> Cm. 8122, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, (London, June 2011), p. 2. This will henceforth be referred to as ‘the White Paper.’

<sup>5</sup> The Robbins Report is the name used for Cmnd. 2154, *Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63* (London, October 1963). This will henceforth be referred to as ‘Robbins’.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Scott, ‘Blueprint or Blue Remembered Hills? The Relevance of the Robbins Report to the Present Reforms of Higher Education’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 14:1 (1988), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> *Robbins*, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cmnd. 2165, *Higher Education: Government Statement on the Report of the Committee under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63*, (London, November 1963), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Barnett, ‘The Coming of the Global Village: A Tale of Two Inquiries’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 25:3 (1999), p. 301.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Layard, John King and Claus Moser, *The Impact of Robbins* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 22.

Furthermore, the historian Peter Scott argued in 1988 that higher education still retained the shape that had been ‘envisaged by Robbins’.<sup>11</sup> Robbins also provided a set of central ideas about higher education. Lord Moser, formerly a statistical advisor to the Robbins committee, stated in a debate on present policy that the Robbins report ‘gets to the essence of what universities are about’.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary policy was formed in the aftermath of the Browne review which was published in October 2010.<sup>13</sup> This review of the funding of higher education policy was initiated on a cross party basis between the Conservative and Labour parties in 2009. While various policy recommendations were not accepted, the subsequent June 2011 White Paper agreed with the principles underlying Browne’s proposed funding changes. It stated that it was ‘influenced by’ the Browne review which recommended changes including ‘a 10% increase in the number of places’, greater competition between universities and for funding to come through student fees rather than from central grants.<sup>14</sup> Though certain policies are very different to those opted for by Robbins, continuity of principles was emphasised by present government ministers. The extent to which continuity from Robbins in present policy has been justly claimed is a central point of contention.

The White Paper retains a key principle from Robbins despite opting for a very different funding policy of higher education. Robbins stated that higher education ‘should not be confined’ to only those who could afford it.<sup>15</sup> The idea was that instead those who embarked on higher education should be those who were able and willing to go. Contemporary policy is for the majority of the tuition cost to be paid for ultimately by students. However, tuition fees do not have to be paid up front. The government pays students’ tuition fees initially and provides a maintenance loan. This debt is then paid back by graduates who are earning over a minimum threshold. If not paid

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<sup>11</sup> Scott, ‘Blueprint’, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Hansard HL, 13/10/2011, coll. 1886; [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/111013-0002.htm> (02/02/12)].

<sup>13</sup> John Browne, ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance’. <<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf>> (16/12/11). Henceforth the term ‘Browne’ will be used as a shorthand reference to the Browne Report.

<sup>14</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 14; *Browne*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Robbins*, p. 210.

back after a 'maximum 30 year period', the debt will be written off.<sup>16</sup> A leading advocate of the income-contingent loan system, Professor Nicholas Barr, explained that the system means that 'students get it free; it is graduates who repay'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore present policy continues to ensure that ability to pay does not determine who can embark on further education. This protects one of the Robbins' reports key ideas that access to higher education should be based on merit, not wealth.

Current policy takes a different approach to that of Robbins towards the likely effect of debt on access to higher education. There were concerns in both periods that the groups underrepresented in universities would be further discouraged by any increase in the debt incurred by undertaking higher education. During the 1960s, fewer women attended higher education than men and Robbins was concerned that debt would further discourage women from applying. Robbins stated that parents might discourage women from applying as 'the eligibility for marriage of the more educated would be diminished by the addition to their charms of what would be in effect a negative dowry'.<sup>18</sup> The Robbins report did not consider an income-contingent system but it is not certain that this system allays fears about debt. While Barr's rationale for an income-contingent system is coherent, whether prospective students perceive the costs of higher education in that manner is another issue. The long term implications of higher tuition fees for access to higher education cannot be predicted but research has been conducted since the 2004 introduction of higher £3000 tuition fees. Callender and Jackson found that the impact was greatest on poorer students, for whom 'fear of debt played an important role in the financial constraint of decision-making'.<sup>19</sup> Present reforms have been based in the belief that an income contingent system avoids the 'undesirable disincentive effects' which contributed to Robbins' decision to reject a loans-based system.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> BIS Committee, 'Oral Evidence'.

<<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/c885-vi/c88501.htm>> (02/01/12).

<sup>18</sup> *Robbins*, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Callender and Jonathan Jackson, 'Does the fear of debt constrain choice of university and subject of study?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 33: 4 (2008), p. 426.

<sup>20</sup> *Robbins*, p. 212.

On two of Robbins' important, interlinked ideas related to access, present policy's stance is unclear. Robbins presented statistical evidence to argue that 'it is highly misleading to suppose that one can determine an upper limit to the number of people who could benefit from higher education'.<sup>21</sup> This principle was endorsed by Browne but did not appear in the White Paper.<sup>22</sup> Another important idea in Robbins was that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so'.<sup>23</sup> Browne identified that one challenge facing higher education was that there were insufficient 'places'.<sup>24</sup> His funding recommendations were intended to tackle this problem. However, contemporary higher education policy states that, 'subject to expenditure constraints', all who are able and willing to attend higher education should be able to go.<sup>25</sup> This seems to be an acceptance of the principle in theory but a rejection in practice. Given that deficit reduction 'is the most urgent' priority for the current government, the supply of higher education places has not been guaranteed to match the demand for places.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, a decline in places seems to be a possibility. In one speech, Vince Cable, the current Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, stated that financial pressures meant that higher education faced 'a period of consolidation, perhaps even contraction'.<sup>27</sup> On these two important issues, present policy does not constitute a clear acceptance of Robbins.

The changed funding system constitutes a rejection of how Robbins recommended that higher education should be provided. Robbins did not oppose the policy that graduates should contribute to their tuition's cost. The committee considered and rejected loans but stated that it found both the arguments in favour and against 'very evenly balanced'.<sup>28</sup> In an extract cited by Browne, it argued that, in time, 'the arguments' in favour of loans could 'lead to some

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Browne*, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Robbins*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Browne*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> H.M. Government, 'The Coalition: our Programme for Government' <[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf)> (4/01/12), p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Cable, Vince. 'A New Era for Universities' <<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/vince-cable-higher-education>> (02/01/12).

<sup>28</sup> *Robbins*, p. 211.

experiment' with such a policy.<sup>29</sup> However, Robbins' openness to graduate contributions to the cost did not constitute support for fees to cover all expenses. The committee stated that they opposed 'those who urge the raising of fees until they cover, if not all, at least a large percentage of the costs of the various institutions concerned'.<sup>30</sup> In a rejection of Robbins' funding policy, the present reforms will alter higher education so that state funding comes predominantly through tuition fees rather than 'as grants distributed by a central funding council'.<sup>31</sup> This change has been justified by different ideas as to the value of higher education.

Present policy offers fundamentally different answers to Robbins on the question of who benefits from the existence of a higher education system. Robbins believed that the external advantages to wider society 'may well be of overriding importance' ahead of the benefits to those individuals who attend higher education.<sup>32</sup> It was not simply an economic investment but, according to Robbins, 'the social advantages of investment in higher education may vastly exceed the commercial return'.<sup>33</sup> These ideas underpinned Robbins' policy that the government should pay for higher education. The present government rejects this view. Instead the White Paper stated that graduates, as 'the beneficiaries of higher education', should 'make a larger contribution towards cost'.<sup>34</sup> This stance is an acceptance of Browne's analysis that 'graduates benefit directly from higher education. The public also receives a benefit but this is less than the private benefit'.<sup>35</sup> For evidence of this assessment, Browne estimated that degrees provide a monetary return of approximately '400%' and also cited a report detailing earnings differences between graduates and non-graduates.<sup>36</sup> Such an approach is a rejection of Robbins' belief that 'the return on education... is not something that can be estimated completely in terms of the return to individuals and of differential

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212; *Browne*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Robbins*, p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Robbins*, p. 205.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>34</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Browne*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Browne*, p. 3. Recent research has suggested that such estimates are optimistic in their assumption that past trends will continue and warn that the predicted return may not be forthcoming for students; see Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder and David Ashton, *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes* (Oxford, 2011).

earnings', and that doing so risked 'being seriously misleading'.<sup>37</sup> Present policy's focus on the private economic benefits of higher education is a rejection of Robbins' assessment that higher education principally benefitted society.

Contemporary government policy takes a different approach to Robbins about how best to deliver higher education. Robbins favoured co-ordination for planning overall provision combined with strong institutional autonomy. Robbins was written during the 'the post-war consensus' during which politicians 'broadly concurred on the appropriateness of a significant role for planning'.<sup>38</sup> For example, the committee cited the Californian higher education plan and Soviet Union provision favourably.<sup>39</sup> However, Robbins rejected the idea that 'all the activities concerned should be... controlled from the centre', instead advocating a balance between central provision and institutional autonomy.<sup>40</sup> This was to be achieved through the University Grant Committee, the independent body that was an intermediary between the state and the universities. Co-ordination was preferred to competition as Robbins believed that it was 'unlikely that separate considerations by independent institutions of their own affairs in their own circumstances will always result in a pattern that is comprehensive and appropriate in relation to the needs of society and the demands of the national economy'.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, contemporary policy agreed with the Browne report's principle that competition 'is a surer way to drive up quality than any attempt at central planning'.<sup>42</sup> While Robbins was impressed by Soviet and American plans of co-ordination, the minister Vince Cable stated that universities 'cannot be directed like Soviet-era tractor factories'.<sup>43</sup> The White Paper calls for a 'move away' from state co-ordination of universities and introduces market pressures into English higher education in a manner unprecedented in post-war Britain.<sup>44</sup> There is a stark contrast be-

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<sup>37</sup> *Robbins*, p. 205.

<sup>38</sup> Desmond King and Victoria Nash, 'Continuity of Ideas and the Politics of Higher Education Expansion in Britain from Robbins to Dearing', *Twentieth Century British History*, 12:2 (2001), p. 189.

<sup>39</sup> *Robbins*, p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>42</sup> *Browne*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Cable, Vince. 'A New Era for Universities'.

<<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/vince-cable-higher-education>> (02/01/12).

<sup>44</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 2.

tween Robbins and contemporary policy on the theory of how to best allocate resources into higher education.

As a result of contemporary policy, market forces will affect higher education in a manner that is entirely contrary to Robbins' policies. Firstly, the White Paper emphasizes that the government 'does not guarantee to underwrite universities and colleges'. Present policy defines failure as when an institution does not attract sufficient students and thereby funding. Robbins did not view the system with this focus on failure in specific institutions but instead believed that the 'system as a whole must be judged deficient unless it provides adequately for all' of higher education's purposes. For-profit higher education was not discussed by Robbins. By contrast, present policy advocates a 'level playing field' to allow new for-profit providers to compete with existing universities.<sup>45</sup> The White Paper encourages competition between universities through a 'core and margin' model of student numbers.<sup>46</sup> The core is the number of students that are centrally allocated to an institution whereas the margin is the number of places that all providers will be able to compete for.<sup>47</sup> Robbins did not support competition but instead stated that 'universities should complement each other in the provision of new courses'.<sup>48</sup> Present policy allows market forces for tuition to determine the size of an institution and the existence of entire departments. By contrast, Robbins argued that the optimum size of an institution 'must be determined by its educational function, its organisation and the availability of a suitable site'.<sup>49</sup> The concept that the existence of university departments should be determined solely by student demand is a rejection of Robbins' belief that 'it is the duty of universities... to ensure that subjects that are important but that do not attract great numbers of students are adequately studied'.<sup>50</sup> Overall, contemporary higher education policy rejects Robbins' preference for co-operation in favour of competition between universities.

However, despite its rhetoric against central planning, present policy does not reject central state control. This is because of the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> Willetts, David. 'UUK Spring Conference Speech'.  
<<http://nds.coi.gov.uk/content/Detail.aspx?NewsAreaID=2&ReleaseID=418283>  
> (02/01/12).

<sup>47</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>49</sup> *Robbins*, p. 153.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

government's aim to cut spending. The coalition agreement stated that the 'deficit reduction programme' was the present government's priority.<sup>51</sup> The choice of the income-contingent loan system ahead of a graduate tax is partly because 'accounting conventions' place the loans outside state borrowing statistics.<sup>52</sup> One of the stated aims of the White Paper is for '£3 billion savings in grant annually by 2014-15'.<sup>53</sup> In order to achieve such savings, central control of both fees and student numbers remains necessary. The economist Nicholas Barr dismissed a free market in higher education as impossible when combined with state guarantees for initial payment of tuition fees. He argued that allowing unlimited recruitment by universities, footed by the taxpayer, would give 'universities a license to print money'.<sup>54</sup> The White Paper states that state control will remain as 'expenditure on student grants feeds directly into the calculations for public borrowing and deficit reduction'.<sup>55</sup> Due to budgetary considerations, state planning remains part of contemporary policy.

The differences in the levels of state involvement between Robbins and present policy are not only the consequence of current governmental economic priorities but also a continuation of historic trends. A turn towards greater state intervention in both research and teaching occurred during the 1980s. This took the form of increased accountability and state use of incentives. The reasons behind this change include both political and economic considerations. Nash and King discounted politics or political 'party ideology' as a key influence on university policy, instead emphasizing the 'economic rationale'.<sup>56</sup> However, the change to greater accountability was not simply due to economics but also part of a broader political strategy. Stevens argued that one aspect of Thatcher's statecraft was the portrayal of state provision as being 'run largely in the interests of an unaccountable professional class'.<sup>57</sup> The reforms towards greater accountability formed a part of this political change. These remain pri-

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<sup>51</sup> H.M. Government, 'Coalition Agreement', p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Gareth Williams, 'Some Thoughts on Higher Education, Browne and Coalition policy', *London Review of Education*, 9:1 (2011), p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> BIS Committee, 'Oral Evidence'.

<<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/c885-vi/c88501.htm>> (02/01/12).

<sup>55</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 48.

<sup>56</sup> King and Victoria Nash, 'Continuity', p. 187.

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Stevens, 'Thatcherism, Majorism and the Collapse of Tory Statecraft', *Contemporary British History*, 16:1 (2002), p. 127.

oritized ahead of institutional freedom in current higher education policy. Robbins recognized that there is a trade-off between institutional freedom and accountability. He advocated a 'nice balance' between the two but with 'the maximum of independence' possible.<sup>58</sup> This level of independence largely remained intact until the 1980s when universities became 'increasingly subject to central policies'.<sup>59</sup> For instance, 'new funding systems... reduced the autonomy of universities' with financial incentives used for influencing research.<sup>60</sup> The consequence was greater state control of higher education.

This influence remains largely intact in present policy. The White Paper claims that it had 'identified major scope for deregulation'.<sup>61</sup> However, it retains influence in both teaching standards and research. For instance, the White Paper states that a 'lead regulator' would remain.<sup>62</sup> The White Paper proposes 'reduced regulation' of teaching standards for institutions with 'a solid track record' but states that all institutions 'must continue to be part of a single assurance framework'.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, Robbins argued that universities 'should be free to establish... standards of competence without reference to any central authority'.<sup>64</sup> Research was not the focus of the White Paper and present research policy has not yet been fully set out. However, it appears to retain use of incentives to influence research. For instance, the Research Excellence Framework, one method of state allocation of funding, measures the impact, or 'the economic and social benefits', of research.<sup>65</sup> This impact forms part of the consideration as to how to allocate funding. Robbins did not consider use of such incentives to influence research. Overall, contemporary state influence over both research and tuition far exceeds the level proposed in the Robbins report.

The current reforms advocate accountability of universities to students in a rejection of Robbins' preference for the maximum prac-

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<sup>58</sup> Robbins, p. 228; p. 230.

<sup>59</sup> Maurice Kogan and Stephen Hanney, *Reforming Higher Education* (London, 2000), 233.

<sup>60</sup> Roseanne Benn and Roger Fieldhouse, 'Government Policies on University Expansion and Wider Access, 1945–51 and 1985–91 Compared', *Studies in Higher Education*, 18:3 (1993), p. 312.

<sup>61</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 73.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Robbins, p. 231.

<sup>65</sup> Anon., 'Research Excellence Framework'.

<<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2011/refimpact.htm>> (15/01/12).

tical level of institutional financial autonomy. In a speech in May 2010, Willetts agreed with Robbins that institutional autonomy could be strengthened by ‘giving them the widest possible range of diverse funding streams’.<sup>66</sup> However, the White Paper did the opposite. Whereas the previous combination of a block grant from government and tuition fee revenues meant that institutions had multiple substantial revenue streams, the new system means that universities have been made heavily dependent on the successful recruitment of students. While institutions must now attract students to attain resources, Robbins believed that ‘an institution must... relate the numbers it admits to resources that it has available’.<sup>67</sup> The new reliance on student fees for income is being used to reform the system: the White Paper states that ‘institutions that cannot attract students will have to change’.<sup>68</sup> Contemporary English higher education policy opts for accountability through state regulation and uses financial incentives to influence the system in a rejection of the Robbins’ preference for the maximum independence possible.

Current policy rejects Robbins’ assumption that academics should and could be trusted to deliver higher education in the interests of the nation. Barr argued that ‘what universities really want is a return to the ’60s, where they got huge amounts of taxpayer money, no questions asked’.<sup>69</sup> Whilst Barr’s statement is a caricature, it is revealing of the reduced trust in academics. Salter and Tapper argued that ‘no state can afford to leave its higher education system to its own devices’ and that a mass higher education system made state control certain to increase.<sup>70</sup> However, the change came in the 1980s after over two decades of large scale of expansion. The lack of confidence in academics was not simply as a consequence of the expansion of the system. Comparing the 1997 Dearing report and Robbins, the academic Ronald Barnett argued that the differences between them reflected that ‘trust in the 1960s... gave way to a determination’ to

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<sup>66</sup> David Willetts, ‘Keynote Speech’.

<<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-keynote-speech>> (04/01/12); *Robbins*, p. 213.

<sup>67</sup> *Robbins*, p. 232

<sup>68</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> BIS Committee, ‘Oral Evidence’.

<<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/c885-vi/c88501.htm>> (02/01/12).

<sup>70</sup> Brian Salter and Ted Tapper, *The State and Higher Education* (Ilford, 1994), p. 18.

influence and control higher education.<sup>71</sup> Present policy does not reject state monitoring of performance or state influence. The differences between those who were asked to compile Browne and Robbins illustrates the changed levels of trust. While the Robbins committee was ‘the product of an assured academic class’ led by the economist Robbins, the Browne report was undertaken by a group mainly comprised of businessmen led by Lord Browne, former chief executive of BP.<sup>72</sup> Present policy’s insistence on accountability through both the market and regulation constitutes a rejection of Robbins’ confidence in autonomous academic institutions.

Despite differences over the optimum balance between accountability and institutional freedom, current policy does retain one central idea from Robbins. The belief that higher education was economically vital helped underpin Robbins’s case for higher education expansion. For instance, Robbins stated that, ‘considered... as an investment, there seems a strong presumption’ for increasing expenditure on higher education.<sup>73</sup> Robbins stated that the sector was vital because ‘in modern societies the skills and versatilities required are increasingly those conferred by higher education’.<sup>74</sup> There are similar statements throughout contemporary policy. The White Paper notes higher education’s importance in relation to ‘the economy’s rising demand for higher-level skills’.<sup>75</sup> Browne similarly emphasized the importance of graduates to the ‘global knowledge based economy’.<sup>76</sup> The historians Nash and King argued that the ‘belief that higher education is increasingly critical to successful economic performance’ became a point of consensus amongst politicians of all political parties since Robbins.<sup>77</sup> The economic importance attached to higher education is reflected in contemporary reforms.

While present policy shares Robbins’ assessment of higher education’s economic importance, both the White Paper and Browne rejected Robbins’ confidence that a university education will leave graduates prepared for their role in the economy. Robbins stated that

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<sup>71</sup> Barnett, ‘Global Village’, p. 295.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301; Curtis, Polly. ‘Top-up Fees Independent Review’.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/nov/09/university-tuition-fees-review-board>> (15/01/12).

<sup>73</sup> *Robbins*, p. 207.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>75</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 48.

<sup>76</sup> *Browne*, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> King and Victoria Nash, ‘Continuity’, p. 187.

most graduates would 'be sufficiently versatile to be capable of varied employment'.<sup>78</sup> By contrast, Browne stated that '48% of employers were dissatisfied' with graduate business awareness and consequently advocated 'a closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills needed in the economy'.<sup>79</sup> Barnett summarized that Robbins proposed that higher education could 'be helpful to the economic well-being of society but it was a function to be offered on the terms of, and firmly under the control of, the academic community'.<sup>80</sup> This academic control has not endured and the White Paper stated that 'reforms will encourage closer working between institutions, employers and students to create a better student experience leading to better-qualified graduates'.<sup>81</sup> The focus on practical skills-orientated learning in present policy is a rejection of Robbins' academic-controlled higher education. It is a consequence of the combination of the lack of confidence amongst current politicians that a university education prepares students adequately for the workplace with the retained belief that higher education is central to future economic growth.

Whereas Robbins believed that skills-based tuition was a secondary priority in higher education, the White Paper emphasizes it as the overwhelming concern. Robbins identified four principal aims of higher education and stated that 'there is no single aim which, if pursued to the exclusion of all others, would not leave out essential elements'.<sup>82</sup> The aims were 'instruction in skills', furthering 'the general process of the mind', 'the advancement of learning' and search for truth, and 'the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship'.<sup>83</sup> Contemporary English politicians identify elements of all of these aims. However, differences in priorities are more apparent in the differences between policies. Robbins and the White Paper hold different views on the ideal relationship between higher education and business. Robbins advocated universities cooperate with 'industry' for research but not tuition.<sup>84</sup> By contrast, the 2011 White Paper desires 'university-industry collaboration' in relation to both 'teaching and research activities', advocating 'genuine

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<sup>78</sup> Robbins, p. 164.

<sup>79</sup> Browne, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> Robbins, p. 303-4.

<sup>81</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 45.

<sup>82</sup> Robbins, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 6-7.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

collaboration between institutions and employers in the design and delivery of courses' so that graduates would have 'the knowledge and skills they need to embark on rewarding careers'.<sup>85</sup> Politicians emphasize this functional purpose of higher education ahead of all other priorities. For instance, Willetts stated that 'it's no good churning out people with STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] qualifications if they haven't got the skills that employers value'.<sup>86</sup> Such a statement is totally contrary to Robbins' viewpoint that while 'there is no betrayal of values when institutions of higher education teach what will be of some practical use, we must postulate that what is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind'.<sup>87</sup> The prioritization of skills-based tuition is a rejection of Robbins' idea of what higher education should impart students with.

Contemporary policy reforms recast both higher education as an economic investment and the student as a consumer in a manner that rejects Robbins' approach. Willetts argued that 'recognizing that the student is in many respects a consumer will not destroy the traditional values of higher education, but strengthen them'.<sup>88</sup> This is denied by academics such as Collini who argued that 'the model of the student as consumer is inimical to the purposes of education' and that the idea of universities serving students 'neglects precisely "the element of partnership between teacher and taught in a common pursuit of knowledge and understanding" which Robbins' identified'.<sup>89</sup> This essay will not enter the debate as to whether the partnership between students and academics can survive market pressures. However, despite Willetts' statement, recent policy did not just 'recognize' the student as consumer but redefined it as the central relationship between student and academic. Students pay for the tuition and universities compete to supply this service. The re-modeling of the student as a consumer is apparent in regulatory changes. For instance, the White Paper declared that the regulator will be 'taking on a major

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<sup>85</sup> Cm. 8122, pp. 6;39;33.

<sup>86</sup> Willetts, David. 'Guardian HE Summit'. <<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-guardian-he-summit>> (04/01/12).

<sup>87</sup> *Robbins*, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Hansard HL, 04/01/2012, coll. 778; [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110628/debtext/110628-0002.htm> (04/01/12)].

<sup>89</sup> Collini, 'Robbins', p. 12.

new role as a consumer champion'.<sup>90</sup> Contemporary higher education policy will require key information sets comprising data on courses, costs and employment destinations about undergraduate courses to be published.<sup>91</sup> As a consequence of these, it is hoped that 'students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money'.<sup>92</sup> While Robbins too noted the insufficiency of information for prospective students, Scott cogently stated that 'the individual citizen, not economic man or the mass consumer, was at the centre of the Robbins inquiry'.<sup>93</sup> Overall, the present market-based reforms were not an approach to higher education even considered by Robbins.

The consequence of the unprecedented focus on the skills-based reason for higher education also constitutes a partial rejection of Robbins' idea of how education should be provided. Robbins believed that there were two alternative approaches to this dilemma. Either the supply could meet the future requirements of the economy or the demand for degrees. Robbins stated that there was 'no reliable basis' for estimating future economic needs and instead thought that the supply should match the demand for degrees.<sup>94</sup> By contrast, present policy states that the higher education system 'should evolve in response to demand from students and employers, reflecting particularly the wider needs of the economy'.<sup>95</sup> Despite the rhetoric about increasing choice for students, the clear priority is the requirements of the economy. State cuts for tuition have been selective on the basis that grants 'should be to fund additional costs and public policy priorities that cannot be met by a student-led funding system alone'.<sup>96</sup> In one speech Cable stated that while government should not 'be prescriptive' about who studies what, 'it will send signals about the wider national interest through... differential funding of STEM subjects'.<sup>97</sup> Present policy's aim is for higher education supply to prioritize meeting the requirements of the economy both through syllabus reform and differential funding. This constitutes a rejection of Rob-

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<sup>90</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> Scott, 'Blueprint', pp. 33-34.

<sup>94</sup> *Robbins*, p. 48.

<sup>95</sup> Cm. 8122, p. 49.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Cable, Vince. 'A New Era for Universities'.

<<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/vince-cable-higher-education>> (02/01/12).

bins' belief that higher education should principally provide places on the subjects which are demanded by prospective students.

Overall, contemporary English higher education policy rejects many of the central ideas and policies associated with the Robbins report. While ability rather than the ability to pay remains the determinant of whether someone can enrol in higher education, that higher education is provided on very different principles to those advocated by Robbins. An unprecedented utilitarian focus is apparent in contemporary higher education reform with the prioritisation of the required skills of future employees. Instead of Robbins' emphasis on co-operation, the 2011 White Paper implemented unprecedented competition between universities for both students and funding. The introduction of a £9000 cap for tuition fees has been justified by an assessment that focuses principally on the individual financial benefits of higher education, an approach rejected by Robbins. The idea that higher education is important to the economy, which was utilised by Robbins to advocate the expansion of publically funded universities, underpins contemporary higher education policy reforms. This is ironic given that current policy rejects many of Robbins' central ideas and policies related to how higher education should be provided, how it should be funded and who it benefits.