

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The UK is home to some of the oldest Higher Education (HE) institutions in the world. This includes the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which were established in 1096 and 1209. However, before the early 1960s, only around 5% of the UK population went to university.
- 1.2 That began to change after ‘The Robbins Report’ of 1963, which recommended that the Government should expand the HE sector by putting more state funding into it. In short, Robbins argued that HE was a public good because universities could generate scientific and technological advancements that would help build the national economy and thereby enable the UK to maintain its international standing. That formed the basis of Robbins’s recommendation that more state funding should go into HE so that every person with the ability and attainment could to university, regardless of their background.
- 1.3 By 1997, The Dearing Report was commissioned to address issues of sustainable funding and further widening of access. Most importantly, the Dearing Report recommended that students should contribute towards the costs of HE because they benefit most from it. Those changes were accepted by the (then) New Labour government and (subsequent) Conservative governments on the basis that HE could create a fairer society by facilitating upward social mobility¹.
- 1.4 Following the Dearing Report in 1997, means-tested tuition fees of up to £1,000 per-year were introduced in England. The cap rose to £3,000 per-year in 2006/08, and then to £9,000 per-year in 2012/13. As things currently stand, English students pay £9,250 per year to study at UK universities, which is in addition to any means-tested maintenance loans that they take out to cover



their living costs (up to £9,250 per-year; on average £5,820). The UK average student debt in 2022-23 was £45,600.

- 1.5 Some have argued that the policy depiction of students as the chief beneficiaries of HE reflects an individualised understanding of the purpose and value of HE. Put simply, HE is now primarily promoted as a private good and, while the financial outlay is high, students are encouraged to see this as an investment in the future employment earnings that they can expect to enjoy after gaining graduate credentials. Moreover, HE is now more accessible because numbers-caps have been lifted and tuition fees have been introduced. That means that, in theory, anyone in the UK with the ability and motivation can pursue HE, regardless of their background or financial position, because the state does not have to fund all of the costs.

2 Complications and Debates

- 2.1 It seems undeniable that there have been some positive changes in the HE sector since the 1960s. For example, participation in HE has increased to unprecedented levels, with over 50% of under 30s expected to enter HE by the age of 30 (DfE, 2019)². Students have more choice within and between institutions than ever, with over 50,000 courses and 395 HE providers³. What's more, according to Universities UK – the collective voice of 142 UK universities – “the UK higher education sector is a remarkable engine for economic growth, world-leading research, and high-quality education.” More specifically, the English HE sector contributes £95 billion to the economy, and supports 815,000 jobs⁴.
- 2.2 Despite the seemingly positive changes, there are concerns about the fact that the UK is now producing more graduates than graduate employment opportunities. For example, in 2017, 49% of graduates were in employment that did not require graduate credentials (ONS, 2017). This suggests that the government depiction of HE as an investment in social mobility is



questionable. It also raises questions about if and how HE can be justified regardless of employment outcomes, and how it should be funded.

2.3 Before we consider some important discussion questions, here are some interesting facts to consider:

- In 2022/23, the UK government spent over £4.5 billion on higher education.
- As of 2022-23, the total value of student maintenance loans stood at £205.6 billion (up 13% from 2021-22).
- In 2022-23, the average student debt was almost 3 times higher in England (£44,940) than in Scotland (£15,430), but Scottish universities receive less funding per-student and have caps on student numbers.
- As of 2022-23, total UK student debt exceeded £225.9 billion – a 13% rise from 2021-22.
- As of 2022-23, the amount of interest paid on student loans stood at £8.35 billion (+78% from the previous academic year).
- More than a quarter (27%) of students from 2022-23 are expected to repay their student loan in full, rising to three-fifths (61%) of the 2023-24 cohort.⁵

3 Discussion Questions:

3.1 Funding-related questions:

- If we cut public funding in HE, who should decide which courses are most valuable and most worthy of funding, and how often should this be reviewed and updated?
- How do we measure value in HE, so that we can decide which courses are most valuable? For example, should we look at employment outcomes such as job-type and job-earnings? Should we look at student satisfaction? Can we actually measure what is most valuable about higher education?



- If HE is only valued in terms of the practical skills and employment opportunities it gives to students, what makes higher education 'higher' and different from further education (i.e., colleges and apprenticeships)?
- How should HE be funded? Should students cover all the costs, some of the costs, or none at all? If you think that students should not have to fund any of the costs at all, where should the money come from? If the state should fund it all, can we avoid having to limit places and having to make decisions about which courses should receive any/most funding?
- How do we avoid disadvantaging the students that are already disadvantaged? For example, the people whose parents can't afford to pay for them to go to university.

3.2 General questions:

- In light of all this, what *should* higher education be for? What is 'higher' about higher education?
- Can a degree of any kind be valuable enough, even if it doesn't lead a person to employment that is directly related to their degree?
- Are some degrees redundant now that we have the internet? Why not just study them online, and preferably in your spare time? Or will it always be valuable for people to 'go' to university and move away from home, regardless of what they study?
- Do you think there should be changes to the English HE system? If so, what changes would you like to see and how could we implement and fund them?



4 References

¹ Williams, J. (2016) 'A critical exploration of changing definitions of public good in relation to higher education.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 41 (4) pp. 619-630.

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843542/Publication_HEIPR1718.pdf

³ <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/what-and-where-study/choosing-course/choosing-undergraduate-course>

⁴ [Universities UK](#)

⁵ <https://www.confused.com/student/student-finance-facts>

