

# The Idea of a University in a Democracy: Rivalry, Diversity and Equality of Opportunity<sup>1</sup>

Simon Szreter      CRASSH Lecture 29<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011, Mill Lane Cambridge

## 1. Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Citizens

I am wearing my academic MA gown to give this lecture today for two reasons, neither of which concerns my dress sense.

Firstly, it is to signify my support for our wonderful younger generation of protesting students who are altruistically campaigning against the unjust policies of the Coalition government. The government is placing a double burden of the fear of debt and of future repayments on today's children, those not yet at university but who will enter next October.

The students who occupied the Senior Combination Room exactly a year ago asked me to wear my gown each day when I went to support them there because they said it made them feel protected to have some "gowns" around as we members of Regent House were affectionately called.

Secondly I am wearing my gown today because it is a symbol of the precious principle of university autonomy from both secular and ecclesiastical authority and from undue economic power and influence. The gown symbolizes the autonomous degree-awarding authority of universities, which was originally claimed for the medieval university by the *scholares* of the *studium generale* of Bologna university 900 years ago.

I wish to congratulate CRASSH under its new Director, Prof Simon Goldhill, on having the vision to organize this set of public lectures at a time when the government has abruptly imposed a revolutionary and regressive change in funding policy on the nation's HE sector. This *demarche* rudely reminds us that the Idea of a University exists, as it always has, in a real and material world, which is subject to external economic and political forces.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks for comments on an earlier draft to Hilary Cooper, Robert Hinde, Andrew McGettigan and Dulcie Szreter; and for 'IT assistance' to Ben Szreter and Zacharias Szreter.

Universities are engines of the mind. They are spaces deliberately created by societies where we read, we think, we imagine, we teach, we critique, we engage with each other, we exchange, we learn and we discover.

Universities are not the only places where this happens but they are the only large institutions where whole, internally diverse communities are dedicated specifically to a complex variety of these intellectual activities.

But the individuals in these communities entrusted by society to organize these precious and vital activities must at all times understand that they are part of the wider society and that, ultimately, they do this for the wider public good. This series of lectures addressing the Idea of a University, is engaging in a two-month long discussion of the nature of that public good. And it was important that this series has included offering a full and equal platform to the government minister most closely associated with promoting this new policy so that we could hear, in his own words, the reasons that he believes justify his dramatic change in policy. It was highly regrettable that we were neither able to hear nor to question the Minister because of an act of protest. I am all for peaceful protest and, as I have said I supported the students last year and I endured with them for 8 hours the appalling state violence of the Metropolitan Police's kettling tactics in a freezing Parliament Square on the day of the fateful tuition fees vote last December 9<sup>th</sup>. But we cannot allow ourselves to make the mistake of engaging in forms of protest to defend the Idea of a University which are contradictory of the most important public good that it provides in a democratic society. This is to offer a space for the freedom of ideas and of their disciplined discussion; and for cultivating the practice of open, critical debate in our society. As Martha Nussbaum has eloquently argued in her essay published last year, *Not For Profit*, it is vital that universities continue to uphold, defend and provide this model for the health of our democracy.

In this series we have heard lectures from our Vice-Chancellor and from representatives drawn from across the Schools and Faculties of this great and historic university. Today, it is the turn of one of our University's historians to conclude this series. I wish at the outset to say a big thank-you to my wife, Hilary Cooper, who has provided great support in preparing this lecture in the limited time available in an unusually busy term- they just seem to get busier, don't they! This lecture was to be given by an Historian of Science, Prof Simon Schaffer, who has had to withdraw. I regard Simon, as I am sure we all do, as one of this university's very finest and greatest scholars. I cannot give you today the wonderful lecture that Simon Schaffer

would have provided on the theme of the ‘Life and Death of Universities’, which I hope we will hear from him in due course. Meanwhile, today I will offer you my own reflections and historical perspective on the Idea of a University.

The central message of this lecture is very simple. It is that words – and their meanings – are very important. They are so important that we cannot and must not allow the government’s White Paper on the future of higher education in England to dictate to us the words we use in the debate on this crucial subject. The White Paper’s constitutional function is to seek consultation. However, it seeks insidiously to constrain the scope of that consultation.

“Students at the Heart of the System”, the Government White Paper, is built round a set of three meretricious policy concepts. These are virus like destroyers of the idea of a university. Its terms of competition, choice and access are words of linguistic stealth, which closely mimic- but which are in fact designed to destroy- a triad of true values which should inform government policy to enable universities to flourish in modern democracy. If we allow the public debate on the future of our universities to be invaded by the viral discourse of competition, choice and access, which the White paper attempts to seed in our midst, then our universities are in mortal danger and so, too, ultimately is the health of our democracy. Policy should instead be informed by a public discourse centred on three alternative terms: rivalry; diversity; and equality of opportunity. These are the genuine values which policy should be designed to pursue if the Idea of a University is to flourish in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy in the UK. The White Paper’s agenda of competition, choice and access is, by contrast, directly inimical to universities’ great public function.

## 2. History: autonomy as the basis for intellectual freedom

So now to history!

When and where do universities come from and what, if anything, can their origins tell us about the Idea of a University? There, that’s a classic historian’s question. It’s also an incredibly important one because it leads us directly to a fourth term, which is central to the Idea of a University, autonomy. The White Paper is silent on this. It is shamefully silent for a dark

purpose. As its accompanying Technical Consultation Paper, slipped out in August, reveals, the government is explicitly dedicated to poisoning these roots of the tree of independence, from which academic knowledge branches and proliferates. Mr Willetts wants to plant a set of commercial for-profit 'new providers' in the Orchard of academia and he finds the long-standing laws of university autonomy must be cleared away first.

So what, then, of origins and of autonomy? We know that institutions of higher learning existed in Ancient Greece, China and the Arab world and there were of course monasteries and cathedral schools in mediaeval Europe. However it is generally agreed that the first autonomous institution of higher learning issuing degrees, from which a continuous line of development to our current universities can be traced, was founded in Bologna in 1088.<sup>2</sup>

Bologna rapidly became the leading centre for the study of law.<sup>3</sup> This expertise was vital, in that it was deployed successfully to establish the principle of institutional autonomy from both the secular and the ecclesiastical powers of the time. This, is what underpins the principle of academic freedom, which is surely the foundation stone of the Idea of a University. In the 1960s it was the great Cambridge medieval historian, Walter Ullman, who us showed exactly how this happened.<sup>4</sup> (I can still fondly recall undergraduate supervisions in the 1970s with Prof Ullman, conducted in his thick Austrian accent, which became intermittently quite unintelligible when he lapsed into the Austrian version of medieval Latin on becoming over-excited in explaining the significance of a crucial document.)

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<sup>2</sup> Over the following century or so 6 more such institutions tracing continuity to the present were founded: Oxford, Salamanca, Paris, Modena, Vicenza and Cambridge in 1209. The rate of formation more than doubled in the next century with 13 more added by 1311. Historical scholarship in fact indicates that the university as a *practice* significantly pre-dates its emergence as an idea. Alan Cobban tells us that, originally, 'The word university ha[d] nothing to do with the universality of learning and it is only by accident that the Latin term *universitas* has give rise to the established nomenclature.' (Cobban, *The Medieval Universities*, p.22) *Universitas* was a general term in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries referring to any body of persons with independent legal status such as a craft guild or a municipal corporation and 'It was not until the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries that *universitas* came into use as a convenient shorthand label applied especially to academic corporations' (Cobban, p.23).

<sup>3</sup> Both Roman Law (Irnerius's commentary on Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis*, 1116-1140) and canon law (Gratian's *Decretum*, or *Concordia Discordantium Canonum*, completed c.1140).

<sup>4</sup> It was Ullman who showed how the *scholares* of Bologna acquired from the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I, in 1158 a constitution confirmed by the papacy, known as the Authentic *Habita*. The importance of the *Habita*, and its subsequent interpretation by Bologna's medieval jurists, was that it led to the formulation of a *privilegium scholarium*, conferring the status of legal autonomy. Alan Cobban summarises the importance of these developments in this way: 'the *Habita* came to be venerated as the origin and fount of academic freedom in much the same way as Magna Carta became an indispensable reference point for English liberties.' (Cobban, p.58)

When it recently came to celebrate its 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Bologna University once again took a lead on issues of academic freedom and a university's autonomy over its affairs, without which such freedom would mean little in political reality. This initiative resulted in the Bologna Declaration of 1988, titled *The Magna Charta Universitatum*, adopted as a joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1999 and signed by the UK Minister of State.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier this year I was one of a group of academics who spent several months producing the Alternative White Paper as a response to the BIS White Paper. I am sorry to have to say that we found it necessary to commence *our* document, offering an alternative vision to that of the government's, with a reiteration of the three key principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum, so far from their spirit is the Government's White Paper.

These are:

*The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching.*

*To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.*

*Teaching and research in universities must be inseparable if their tuition is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society, and advances in scientific knowledge.*

<http://www.magna-charta.org/>

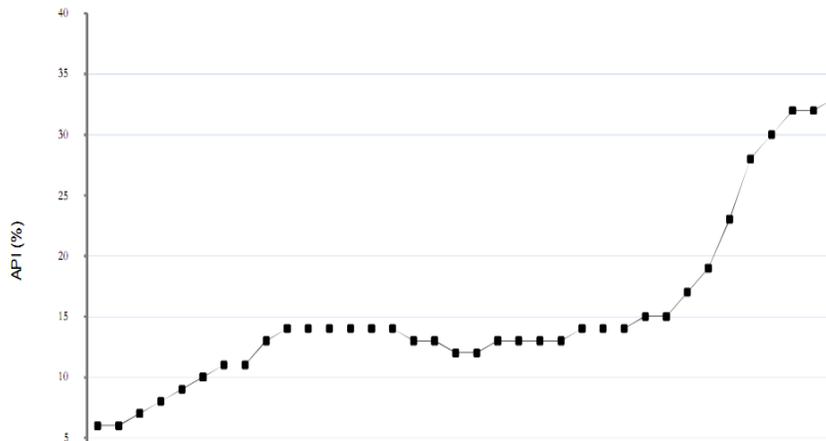
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<sup>5</sup>Minister of State for Education and Employment (Baroness Tessa Blackstone)

### 3. The idea of a University in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Democracy

What, then, about the Idea of a University in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Democracy? From their origins and throughout their history it has been recognized that the autonomy of universities from political authority and from economic power is vital for preserving their most essential public function, that of providing a space for free, untrammelled intellectual enquiry. It is clear, however, that much has changed in society since 1088. Universities must always continue to adapt their founding principles to remain valid, vigorous and relevant. I would argue that probably one of the most challenging of such changes across all these centuries of change is something very recent. This is the rise of democratic society. In a British context, it may strike some of you as rather idiosyncratic, betraying my immersion in the *longue duree* of historical perspective, to seize on this feature of our society as a matter of historical novelty. Haven't we been democratizing ourselves in the UK since the 1832 Great Reform Act and haven't we all had the vote, men and women, since 1928? Yes, indeed, men and women over age 21 have been able to vote for over 80 years. However, recall also that most university students, those aged 18-21, remained unenfranchised constitutional minors until as recently as 1<sup>st</sup> January 1970. Moreover, university was still not considered a relevant life option by the vast majority of the population as recently as the 1980s.

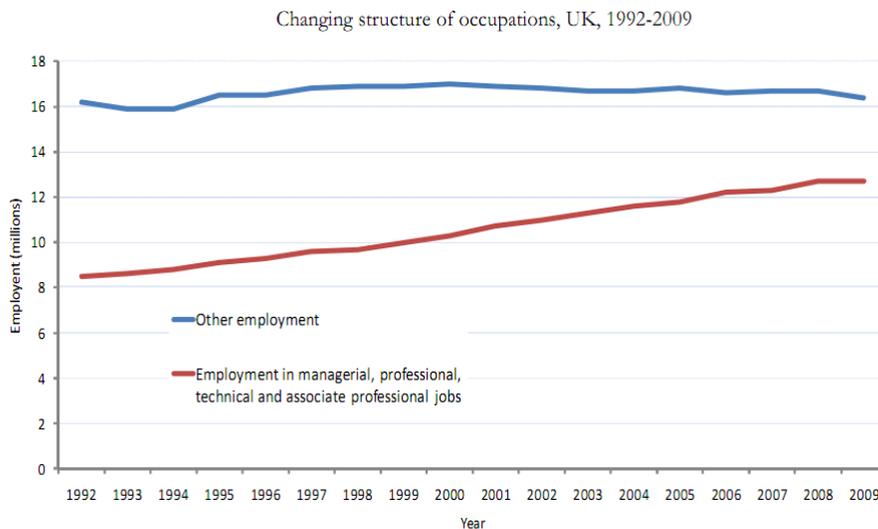
Participation by young people in Higher Education, Age Participation Index2 (API) Great Britain, 1961 to 2005



Source: Elias, P., Purcell, K., (2007) Occupational Change and the Expansion of Higher Education in the UK: the Impact on Graduate Earnings

## SLIDE 1

As Slide 1 shows the facts are that while university education had been expanded very significantly during the 1960s from just 5% of each cohort to 10%, it was still the case that only a small minority, slightly under 15%, were entering higher education for most of the 1980s. The rapid rise in student populations to current levels of over a third of each cohort only happened in the 1990s. With this recent expansion in higher education has also come a huge change in the structure of occupations and social class within Britain. Still a predominantly working-class society throughout the 1970s, as Slide 2 shows it is only since the 1980s that there has been disproportionate expansion of professional, managerial and associated technical jobs which have risen steadily for at least the last 20 years, as the chart shows.



UK Labour Force Surveys, 1992 – 2009 (Quarter 2 each year)

Source: Elias, P., Purcell, K., (2007) Occupational Change and the Expansion of Higher Education in the UK: the Impact on Graduate Earnings

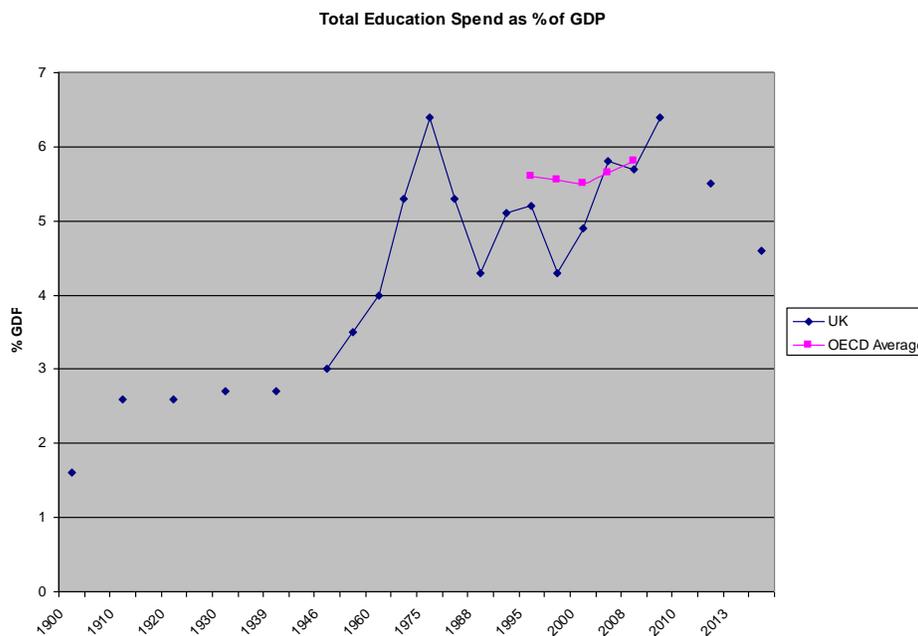
## SLIDE 2

This has substantially raised the stakes for all 18 year olds to acquire tertiary education credentials, particularly the most valued ones from universities, giving access to this expanding range of higher level, middle class jobs.

Thus, insofar as the rise of democracy has entailed changes in society of direct and compelling relevance to the practices and the idea of a university, I think it is reasonable to argue that this has been an increasingly pressing political and electoral issue only during the last 20 years or so in Britain.

As Britain, along with other developed economies, aspires to consolidate its position as a high value added, knowledge based economy, dependent on a continually replenished supply of highly educated graduates and professionals, investment in all three educational levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, becomes of paramount importance. That is the reason why the OECD has recently issued a statement in May 2011 explicitly specifying that cuts to educational spending are an inappropriate and counter-productive austerity measure for any government to take and which cannot be justified on any economic grounds, given the vital role of such investment for the future growth of the world economy (OECD Forum 2011 Restoring Public Finances).<sup>6</sup>

It is instructive, therefore, at this point to look at Slide 3 which shows the post war history of UK education spending, and to consider the Coalition government's spending plans for the next 3 years in that context.



Source: IFS Briefing Notes 71,121, HM Treasury (2006), OECD Education at a Glance 2011

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.oecd.org/document/0/0,3746,en\\_21571361\\_46558043\\_46996736\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/0/0,3746,en_21571361_46558043_46996736_1_1_1_1,00.html)

### SLIDE 3

This confirms that, although they like to enjoy the reputation as the Party which understands the processes of economic growth, the Conservative Party between 1979 and 1997 systematically reversed a long-term rise in the proportion of national income spent on the nation's education system, that is on developing the nation's human capital. The international comparison shows that even after the subsequent 10-year period of increased spending by New Labour, in 2008, the most recent year for which comparable data exist, the UK still recorded a spend marginally below the OECD average. Furthermore whilst there were increases in education spending under New Labour, Higher Education was always somewhat the poor relation in all this, experiencing the lowest growth, relative to primary and secondary and FE spending.

The analysis by the independent Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) of government spending plans for the next three years shows the share of national income which will be spent on education falling back below the levels of the mid 1970s. And as is well-known, the Higher Education budget is now set to experience a catastrophic cut in the next three years, falling a full 40% from 7.1 billion to 4.2 billion, with this being achieved through an 80% reduction in the teaching grant to universities. The government's intention is that the cut in public spending in higher education will be offset by the increase in private funding through fees.

So how is this revolution in higher education to be brought about and with what results on the character of the system and on the Idea of a University? The 2011 White Paper repeats time and again its answer to this is its aim to promote competition and choice. And it also talks of its goal simultaneously to promote access.

What I want to show in the remainder of this lecture is that all three of these explicit policy goals of the White Paper, competition, choice and access - and the underlying values that they embody- are false gods. Mr Willetts and his advisors are worshipping at the wrong shrine. I will argue that the concepts of competition, choice and access are antithetical not only to the original Idea of a University in the form created after 1088 in Bologna but also, and more importantly for us today, they are antithetical and harmful to the Idea of a university appropriate to a democratic society. They are the wrong responses to this fundamentally new historical condition to which

universities must successfully adapt and contribute today. I will argue that in a modern democracy we must re-orient our public discourse of the Idea of a University away from the White Paper's distorting language to secure for it instead the values of rivalry, of diversity and of equality of opportunity.

#### 4. Rivalry, not Competition

So firstly, why rivalry, not competition?

Competition as a general concept appears to be unexceptionable in referring to the activity of universities. It appears simply to invoke what happens among the teachers and students in the community of the *universitas* when they are competing with each other to produce the most excellent scholastic achievements and surely, this, after all, is what Socratic dialogue, critical engagement with other scholars' works and subjecting one's own research to peer-review is all about. However, this is a particular form of competition much more accurately termed "rivalry". It is occurring within an overarching collaborative framework. Both sides gain in knowledge from such rivalrous competition. We need to realize that the White Paper is not talking about competition in this rivalrous sense. It is talking about a different kind of competition altogether. This is the so-called zero-sum competition that is believed by economists to characterise the operation of factor and commodity markets in efficiently pricing goods and services in the world of commerce and exchange. Adam Smith was inclined to see a free and untrammelled form of such competition as leading through some ineluctable process, for which he invented the rather give-away religious term of faith, the 'invisible hand', to the creation of general prosperity for all. However, subsequent theorists have acknowledged that, in the absence of some serious state-based regulatory structure, any such competitive free market in fact tends over time towards monopoly power for a ruthless and consequently powerful few, rather than widely-dispersed prosperity for all. This is because, as R.H. Tawney memorably put it, 'freedom for the pike is death to the minnow'.

I am grateful to learn from the organizer of this series, Simon Goldhill, that this fundamental distinction which I want to emphasise between concepts of zero-sum free market competition and the rivalrous pursuit of excellence can

in fact be traced back at least to Hesiod in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC (*Works and Days* 11-26).<sup>7</sup>

The problem with zero-sum competition, as against rivalrous competition, is that its ultimate goal is to eliminate rivals or to incorporate them into the winners. Either way this leads to a reduction of diversity. This is not only death to the gobbled-up minnows, it is death to the goals and productivity of collaborative intellectual work in the university sector of our society. No doubt a government minister defending the White Paper would say that the competition envisaged, though certainly of this kind in that the White Paper *does* countenance the possibility of HE institutions failing or being incorporated by other entities, is not that of cut-throat competition between individual academics, but only between institutions. This, it would be argued, is merely to ensure the market discipline of value for money in the HE sector. However, this would be disingenuous to say the least. It is quite obvious that to create and promote this sort of competition between HE institutions will lead to all kinds of reactive and responsive behaviour as the discipline of competition bites in a world where only the strong can survive. In such an environment CEOs (those who were once called V-Cs) are forced to take ruthless and internally divisive decisions as they fight for institutional survival against the predatory competition, closing unprofitable departments, expanding forms of activity which can generate revenue regardless of academic integrity or value, and no doubt looking askance at their own staff proposing forms of intellectual collaboration, which appear to be helping competing institutions or interfering with the CEO's plans to close unprofitable cost centres.

I am not, I know, describing a situation which is likely to be seen any time soon on the banks of the Cam. But neither is all this fanciful fantasy. I am, indeed, describing precisely what is already happening elsewhere in the HE sector, for instance at Middlesex University right now, even before the White Paper's tourniquet of a further dose of market competition is applied.

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<sup>7</sup> The Smithian competition that I have just described is a form of zero-sum competition among men, which Hesiod deprecates as it 'promotes all the evils of warfare and slaughter'. However, there is another form of competition which Hesiod characterizes as 'certainly better for mankind'. This is when,  
a man gets eager to work on beholding a neighbour who is exceedingly wealthy and makes haste plowing and sowing, putting his household in order; so neighbour competing with neighbour, runs after riches, and therefore this... benefits mankind.

The latter is a form of competition which we may more accurately term 'rivalry'. This Hesiod approves of. But it is not Hesiod's rivalry to promote competition for excellence, which the White Paper advocates for the HE sector in Britain; it is the commercial competition between pikes and minnows for a pool of resources and students, with winners and losers.

As Andrew McGettigan's article in *Research Fortnight* has documented, in pursuit of economic competitiveness Middlesex has closed its most academically distinguished, highest RAE—rated, European Philosophy Dept.<sup>8</sup> In 2010 it packed off this dept and its 3 Master's courses to Kingston University. The CEO's impeccable business logic in doing this was that Middlesex will keep all the funding earned by this dept at the 2008 RAE right through until 2014 while not having to bear the staffing costs for the dept over the next 4 years. Middlesex has also achieved apparently superlative economic competitiveness, by reducing its staff costs to just above 50% of its budget. (for most universities this is above 60%). The Middlesex CEO's vision focuses on global expansion recruiting students by franchised overseas campuses in Dubai and Mauritius (Why Mauritius? It is the tax haven of preference for the Indian wealth elite). To fund this he has sold off all but one of the six North London campuses, leaving the youth of Tottenham, scene of this summer's riots, with no local Higher Education institution. Indeed, there is not local HE institution in the entire borough of Haringay. This is an ominous development considering that all commentators expect the tripling of fees to result in more students choosing to live at home whilst they study.

This is where market competition leads universities. It is a false idol. Whereas rivalrous competition, striving for excellence, is of the essence of the Idea of a University, competition in the commercial sense used throughout the White Paper, is most certainly not. This is not just a minor semantic quibble. It amounts to a fundamental category error, which will have egregious consequences if followed through as a principle guiding policy for the nation's HE institutions. Rivals compete to promote excellence in the academic world. They engage in a rationally critical but ultimately collaborative process of examining each other's work in order to exclude error and to promote genuine insight and originality. Though termed 'criticism', it is an act of mutual generosity and respect between those involved and it is crucially supportive of the intellectual productivity of all concerned: researchers, teachers and students- the community of the *universitas*. Ideally, the institutional structures of universities should be

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew McGettigan, 'Privatization: The Truth About Middlesex'. This was the first of three articles by Andrew McGettigan in *Research Fortnight*, collectively titled 'The Third Revolution. A major series investigating how forms of capital and constitution are set to reshape higher education in England'. They are published as Supplements to Issue Numbers 374, 375, 376 Sept-October 2011 and are compulsory reading for CPU: [http://www.researchresearch.com/images/stories/pdfs/3rdrevolution\\_supplement.pdf](http://www.researchresearch.com/images/stories/pdfs/3rdrevolution_supplement.pdf).

designed to maximise the diversity of knowledge, skills and expertise amongst these rivals and bring them into critical contact and articulation with each other. Setting up a system of life-and-death commercial competition between universities is a colossal, divisive mistake, which can only degrade and damage universities' intellectually productive capacities and their wider public contribution to our society and our local communities.

## 5. Diversity, not Choice

I want to move now to the second key term in the government's White Paper, 'choice'. In discussing the difference between competition and rivalry, we have already begun to encounter the importance of something I have called 'diversity'. This is the concept which is of genuine value when it comes to addressing, in the context of universities, what the White Paper refers to solely by the term 'choice'. The White Paper talks mostly about student choice and is comfortable with describing the prospective student as a consumer choosing to buy a degree. It is silent on the crucial issue of what it is that underlies and creates the possibility of choice in this context.

The answer to that is diversity, by which I mean diversity of choice in the provision of subjects to study. The diversity of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary possibilities on offer at our universities provides the most essential aspect of choice for any prospective student- this diversity constitutes their field of choice.

Prospective students can only be expected to encounter the secondary school forms of a rather restricted range of the many disciplines that enrich the wide, growing and diversifying range of human intellectual endeavours that we pursue in universities. The White Paper's invocation of the notion of consumer choice has nothing whatsoever to do with subject diversity. Indeed it is deliberately and misguidedly conducive to its opposite. The government proposal is to use the power of student choice to create a mechanism of consumer sovereignty in the hands of the nation's 16-17 year olds at the point at which they make their young choices of what subjects to study at university. In this way it is envisaged they will exercise a determining 'market' influence over what can be offered to be taught at universities. Mr Willetts gleefully talks of money following the student's consumer choice. The White Paper places its faith in the hands of these youngsters to determine the disciplinary, sub-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary shape of

the nation's future universities. And just in case these youngsters are tempted to choose to study something more imaginative and unknown, the government is also placing a personal debt round each of their necks of anything from £40 to 50k to act as a discipline on them to ensure they choose something sensible.

It is evident that this crude device of students exercising consumer choice can only reduce the subject diversity of the field of choice available to students. They cannot be expected to choose in substantial numbers unknown and exotic disciplines and sub-disciplines, met by few if any students in their schools. This will lead to the reduction of such departments and the diversity of their degree offerings by the zero-sum logic of competition between universities for students that is also created by the White Paper. Since this undermines choice by reducing the diversity of choice available, it is therefore a self-contradictory feature of the White Paper's logic even within its own blunt terms. However, more seriously, it also has the clear potential radically to undermine scholarly diversity in the UK HE sector, with consequent dramatic losses in our knowledge capacity and the scope for rivalrous collaborative and interdisciplinary research and originality. Some V-Cs have already begun the process of rationalizing the choices on offer in their universities.

In another context in the natural world we have belatedly come to realize, to humanity's cost, that one of the most destructive tendencies of unleashing unrestrained forms of market competition, has been dramatic and accelerating reduction in the species diversity of the natural ecology of this planet. The Government White Paper, promoting the same forces of competition, may well achieve the same drastic effects on cultural and pedagogic diversity in our universities, even while strenuously asserting that its proposals encapsulate some form of liberation of the powers of student choice.

The White Paper's conception of choice is superficial and misguided because choice of university course is not primarily about buying different prices and qualities of the same item. Ideally, the quality of pedagogic provision should be uniform at all universities so that a university degree provides a guarantee to the world that an individual has mastered an equivalent degree of higher learning in the subject in question, no matter which university they attended. This would provide a valuable service to employers, for instance. The choice of what to study at university is not

about which quality of baked beans tin you can afford to take off the supermarket shelf. It is about being offered the possibility of trying the sorts of food you've never tried before. It is about being able to make that choice without price and cost determining the option you take. It's about having confidence that you will be guided during the next three years of your life through something exciting and new, undertaking something exacting-disciplinary studies- that will change and develop you. For our young people making choices about what disciplines to commit themselves to, in order to develop their individual and unique intellectual talents and interests, such choice is only primarily meaningful in the context of a genuine diversity of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary alternatives, each of an equivalent quality, guaranteed by its status as a university degree course. This is also how economies can grow and the widening diversity of disciplinary choice at UK universities in the recent past (43,360 different courses on offer in 2011) arguably is part of the reason why the British economy has flourished during the last several decades especially in the arts and media, during a period when manufacturing jobs were being lost.

## 6. What, then, finally of Access and Equality of Opportunity

The third key policy goal in the White Paper is 'access'. Of its six main sections, Section 5 of the White Paper is titled 'Improved social mobility through fairer access' – who could possibly be opposed to that? There can be no doubt whatsoever that the question of social mobility is a crucial one for the legitimacy of democracies. In our society the principal sources of income and status for most people derives no longer from birthright, landownership or family connection, but from an individual's capacity to undertake a valued form of work. A genuine liberal democracy therefore risks having its legitimacy called into question if it is demonstrably the case that a significant proportion of its populace are somehow discriminated against by the socio-economic system in which they live, so that they are systemically prevented from access to the more desirable and well-remunerated jobs available. As I said earlier in this lecture, British society's relatively recent transformation into a democratic society of fully-empowered citizens, in the sense first specified by T.H. Marshall (1893-1981) in his classic essay of 1950, 'Citizenship and Social Class', has perhaps been the most generally important new historical development, to which the 900-year-old Idea of a university must either adapt and prove its worth here in Britain, or face consignment to the capacious dustbin of history, a fate the colleges of

Oxbridge flirted with during another relatively recent period of great socio-economic change, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

However, the White Paper's thinking and analysis here is, once again, symptomatically superficial. And because of that, it is also profoundly misleading and quite unhelpful- either to the university sector, or to the hundreds of thousand of youngsters in our society unable to gain access to our universities, including to the most desirable ones, the Russell Group. The White Paper's argument is that if the government can set up a system of incentives for university admissions offices to provide bursaries and other forms of support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds leading to what it terms 'fairer access' to universities, then that will improve social mobility.

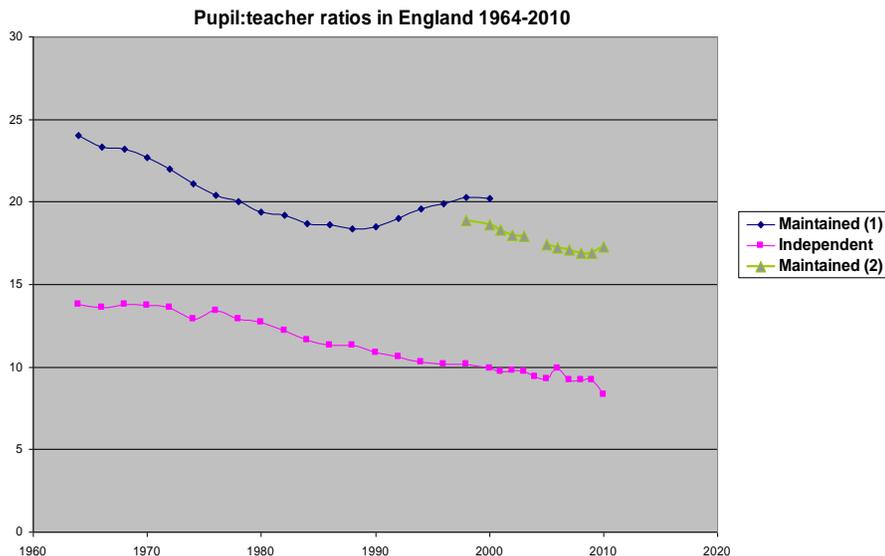
Much was made last year of David Cameron's outburst against his own university, Oxford, about its record on admitting black students with the clear implication that better policies on access and perhaps a less stuffy attitude to non-traditional applicants would deal with the issue. As was rightly pointed out in response by Oxford University, the key to increased participation by disadvantaged groups in our higher education system lies further back, in the opportunities afforded to them by society and crucially by the primary and secondary education system. It is equality of opportunity at each of these earlier stages of the education system that is required if we are to genuinely increase their access to the Russell Group of universities.

Dept of Education data show that already by the time they take GCSEs, half of children from better-off families get 5 or more good GCSEs (5 A\*-C including English and Maths). By contrast only one-fifth do so from families on free school meals. That is not some tiny minority in our society. It is shocking but true that fully 16% of children in Britain today are on free school meals. The inequality firmly in place by age 15 largely explains why only 1 in 7 of this 16% on Free School Meals gain entry to any university- and far fewer of them to Russell Group universities. Whereas, 33%, 1 in 3 from the better- off homes, enter university, including having a near monopoly, with the pupils of independent schools, on Russell Group places.

Until this stark inequality of opportunity is seriously addressed, it is hard to see how access and bursary programmes at age 18 can make any real dent in the reality in our society of social *immobility*. If large proportions of

disadvantaged children don't have the qualifications for higher education, how can they benefit from bursary schemes to improve their access?

What prospect, then, is there of the education system delivering the step change in equality of opportunity that is required? Targeted intervention programmes, such as Sure Start and the educational support represented by EMA (Education Maintenance Allowances), or by Aim Higher, all of which benefit disadvantaged children, are all being cut, Even with the growth in schools spending under the previous Labour government, much of which was on capital projects, as Slide 4 shows, the pupil teacher ratio in maintained schools fell only gradually during the recent period, remaining stubbornly high.



Source: Department for Education Statistical First Release: Pupil Teacher ratios by type of schools in England (Various)

Note: Maintained (1) is combined primary and secondary. Maintained (2) is primary, secondary and state nursery schools. Independent is secondary and preparatory combined. Ratios given as full time equivalents for staff and pupils.

## SLIDE 4

Contrast this with the position in the independent sector, where the pupil-teacher ratio has consistently fallen over time and is today again approaching one half that of the maintained sector where it was at the end of the 1990s, after 18 years of under-investment in state schools by the last Conservative government. Parents of the 7% of pupils in the independent sector know what they are buying for their children and the continuing disparity with the

state sector has everything to do with maintaining social structures of inequality of opportunity and nothing to do with social mobility.

Meanwhile the wider socio-political context has been for 3 decades one in which inequality of incomes has been relentlessly rising, cheered on by a right-wing press, whose influence over the political choices made in No.10 Downing Street has earlier this year been candidly acknowledged by the leaders of both main parties, once they found it vital to distance themselves from Mr Murdoch after the phone-hacking scandals. They freely admitted that for three decades we have had governments of both parties and the machinery of the media who would not touch the dreaded ‘T’ word, tax being one of Mr Murdoch’s pet hates and something he personally avoids scrupulously. We have had governments who have been ‘intensely relaxed’ about inequality, to quote Mr Mandelson, a former Labour Minister.

Consequently, we wake up today in 2011 with levels of income inequality, measured by the IFS’s Gini coefficient that take us back to pre-Second World War levels, as shown by Slide 5.



SLIDE 5

The access agenda of the Government White Paper is barely a fig-leaf worth inspecting, if it is supposed to be covering the embarrassment of the British at the unequal and immobile society that we have become.

The Liberal Democrats can be given some credit for a nod towards equality of opportunity in education with the provision written into the Coalition agreement for a pupil premium to follow disadvantaged children. However the devil is in the detail. The extra funding goes into the whole school pot, rather than being dedicated to that individual child. A forensic analysis of the impact of this policy just published by the IFS reveals that in fact the real-terms reductions in most schools' budgets over the coming 3 years will far outweigh the impact of the pupil premium. They show that unless a secondary school is in the most deprived 20% of schools, it will be experiencing real cuts in its budgets over the next 3 years, even taking account of the freeze in teachers' pay. Unfortunately nearly half of secondary children in receipt of free school meals are spread across the schools that are not in this extremely deprived category and who will therefore be in schools that are receiving less, not more, resource.

It is well documented that the positive social mobility that was witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s in this country has stagnated since then. Look again at the pupil:teacher ratios; these were the only decades since the war when not only income inequality but also educational inequality in teaching resources between the state-educated and the privately educated was reducing. The two are of course intimately related. Low and insufficiently progressive taxes result both in rising income inequality and in less public revenue to fund state schools. I submit that no mere 'access' policy to universities is going to achieve anything until it is underpinned by a political commitment and a fiscal strategy to address the causes of radical inequality of opportunity in wider education provision throughout our society.

'Access', like the White Paper's other key terms, 'competition' and 'choice', turn out to be about the opposite of what they purport to mean. They are political smokescreens, carefully selected terms of discourse designed to distract from the real policy effects enacted in their name, which will in fact inflict lasting damage on rivalry for excellence, on diversity of provision, and on equality of opportunity.

## 7. Summary: What are to be our terms of Public Policy Discourse To Be?

To conclude, I have argued that competition, choice and access are superficially persuasive notions born either of sciolism or political cunning among those wielding them. The White Paper never bothers to subject these three preferred key terms to any form of definitional exercise, let alone scrutiny. The terms which should replace them in our public policy discourse on the future of our universities are: rivalry, diversity and equality of opportunity. These three terms are nowhere to be found in the White Paper's text (save for reference a couple of times to the desirability of a 'diversity of providers', meaning for-profit corporations, like Apollo).

History shows that underpinning all of these three virtues is university autonomy, another absentee from the White Paper.

This White Paper is an invalid basis for consultation. It does not understand nor does it attempt to understand that which it would destroy out of studied ignorance. By design, it has eschewed any conception of universities' enormous public benefit. It is a document unfit for purpose.

Today I stand before you wearing a university MA gown which symbolizes the autonomy and freedom of thought on which the Idea of a University is founded. In a democracy the Idea and the practices of our universities flourish and nourish our society through rivalry, diversity and equality of opportunity: being open to all talents to enter and contribute. We can only start to contest the government's policy and the conceptual fog it has created by insisting that we take back control of the terms of public debate. We need to be asking of the government and its representatives at every opportunity how their proposals for Higher Education will foster and promote rivalry, diversity, equality of opportunity and autonomy.