

FIFTY YEARS OF Robbins

The Robbins principle that “university places should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment” is as powerful today as it was novel 50 years ago. **Nicholas Barr** and **Howard Glennerster** review the impact of the Robbins Report on the future of higher education and describe how LSE research shaped it.



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Student in main entrance to Old Building 1964

Fifty years on it is difficult to remember what the higher education world was like in 1963 and what views were then current.

Only about 5 in every 100 young people went on to full-time degree courses, not all of those at university. Only 1 per cent of working-class girls and 3 per cent of working-class boys did so. Another 3 per cent of young people went on to teacher training and other non-degree courses. For many this was an acceptable, indeed inevitable, state of affairs. Many in universities were convinced that they were already scraping the bottom of the barrel – “more means worse”, to quote a notion popular at the time.

Lord Robbins, who had taught at LSE since the 1920s and had had many public roles, was asked to chair a Committee of Enquiry into the Future of Higher Education. True to his background he insisted that the findings had to be based on the best evidence available. He appointed the School's Professor of Social Statistics, Claus Moser, to head the research team, and the report was supported by five volumes of statistical evidence.

What the Report did – notably in the devastating Appendix One – was to explode the notion that only a tiny few were capable of benefiting from higher education. A steadily rising percentage of young people were obtaining the necessary qualifications to enter university. Many had the ability but were leaving school at 16 or even earlier. Many failed the 11 plus exam and went on to schools that offered no or few qualifications; yet their capacities, revealed in numerous surveys, suggested that they were capable of getting higher qualifications. There was a large pool of untapped talent. Restricted entry to higher education was a major barrier to the British economy.

Hence, the Report argued, the number of places in higher education should be expanded to ensure that all who were qualified and wished to enter should be able to do so. This recommendation provoked furious letters to *The Times* lambasting the Report's

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utopianism. But the dam had been broken, and new universities began to be built.

Where had the ideas and evidence come from? To a large extent they had been nurtured at LSE. In the 1950s the modern sociology of education began there with the work of Chelly Halsey and Jean Floud. Their research showed that intellectually capable children from working-class homes often did badly at the 11 plus (the closest example being one of the authors of this article); if they did pass, they tended to leave school early. The research by Halsey and Floud was powerfully reinforced by the work of J W B Douglas, who had founded the first longitudinal study of a sample of children born in one week, in March 1946. The work came within the responsibility of the School's Population Investigation Unit, one of the major demographic powerhouses of all time. These children had been followed through their infant years and on through school; their health, family background and intellectual capacities had been measured and recorded. As Moser put it at the time, this was the “methodological equivalent of the eighth wonder of the world”. And the pool of talent revealed was incontrovertible. Meanwhile there was the influence of the very new human-capital school of economics. Investment in higher education paid off: the rate-of-return figures prove it. So a strongly LSE climate of ideas and research helped shape the Report.

In retrospect the Report was not right about everything. A major area where it lacked courage (or perhaps was politically astute) was in its plans to finance expansion. Initially, the numbers were so small that it seemed possible to continue as before. The Exchequer would fund universities, there would be no tuition fees and the state would finance, quite generously, the living expenses of students. The

optimism of the 1960s made this look possible. But before long the Treasury began to have doubts and sought ways to save money. Student grants became less generous and expansion slowed down, eventually stagnating during the 1980s. Robbins had transformed the notion of restricted access, but the Report had not transformed the finance of higher education to pay for the expansion.

Not all LSE's thinkers had had their ideas accepted. In evidence to the Committee, Alan Peacock and Jack Wiseman of the Economics Department argued that the growing cost of expansion should be met in a different way. Students should pay for their higher education at least in part through loans which they would obtain from the state and repay through the tax system. For the Committee that was a bridge too far. Yet many years later it was a bridge that had to be crossed. By the late 1980s, 25 years after the report, the participation rate in higher education was around 14 per cent, low by international standards, in part because places were largely publicly financed. A small student loan was introduced in 1990, partly replacing the grant. The reform provoked two separate controversies: whether the loans were well designed; and whether the principle was right. Many at LSE, including Peacock and Wiseman, Mark Blaug and Howard Glennerster in the 1960s, and Nicholas Barr from the 1980s, have argued that loan repayments should be collected as an income-related payroll deduction alongside income tax (in the jargon, loans should have income-contingent repayments). From 1998, loans in the UK have been of precisely this sort, an aspect which is no longer controversial.

Nevertheless, the controversy about the principle remains. So what are the arguments for financing higher education in part through student loans? The

first argument concerns fairness. “Free” is just another word for “someone else pays”. The people who go to university – still – are disproportionately from better-off backgrounds. Thus undue reliance on taxpayers redistributes wealth from people who are less well off to people from better-off backgrounds whose degrees will help them to remain among the better-off. Separately, the evidence is powerful that it is not student loans which primarily deter access for people from poor backgrounds, but lack of attainment in school. Thus the most powerful levers to widening participation are added emphasis on early child development, approaches that support pupils who are struggling, and policies to encourage young people to stay on in school.

The second argument is that what economists call “skill-biased technological change” is increasing the demand for skills. To remain competitive, countries need large, high-quality systems of higher education. Recently, the LSE Growth Commission has argued that one of the UK's great strengths has been its system of higher education, an outcome largely based on the Robbins expansion.

However, policy faces a potential train crash. On the one hand there are pressures for the expansion of higher education. But those demands face longer-term pressures on public finances, notably the striking rise in the number of old and very old over the next 30 years. This is accompanied by the impact of an increasingly competitive global economy which limits a country's capacity to increase taxes, or is felt to do so. England, at least, has developed an answer to that dilemma, even if it could be improved upon. And it is one of which, we suspect, Robbins would have approved.

The central Robbins vision of high-quality higher education, open to all with the ability and aptitude to benefit, is alive and more relevant than ever. ■



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For more on this topic by the authors, see the following articles: ‘The higher education White Paper: the good, the bad, the unspeakable – and the next White Paper’ by Nicholas Barr, in *Social Policy and Administration*, 46/5 (October 2012); and ‘A graduate tax’ by Howard Glennerster, Stephen Merrett and Gail Wilson in *Higher Education Review*, 1/1 (1968), republished as ‘A graduate tax revisited’ by Howard Glennerster, *Higher Education Review*, 35/2 (spring 2003).

On Tuesday 22 October LSE will be holding a one-day event, *Shaping Higher Education Fifty Years After Robbins*, supported by the LSE Annual Fund, to include a public lecture open to all. Details of the lecture will be advertised from mid-August at lse.ac.uk/events

ALUMNI VIEWPOINT

Tessa Blackstone on what the Robbins Report meant for women's education.

When the Robbins Report was published, only one in four undergraduates were women and for postgraduates the proportion was even lower. The poor representation of women was a consequence of prevailing social attitudes in the 1950s. Girls were not expected to enter careers in professions such as law, medicine and accountancy, nor to embark on routes to senior management in the public or private sector. Teaching, especially in primary schools, and nursing were common career choices, neither of which required a university degree. Many others were encouraged to become secretaries or to work in junior administrative jobs. Consequently, fewer girls than boys took their A levels at school and some of those who did made no university application.

There is no evidence that the universities themselves discriminated against female applicants; the problem was that there were not enough of them. The exceptions were the medical schools,

many of which had a 10 per cent cap on female entry, thus discriminating against young women who wished to study medicine.

The research done for the Committee identified the underrepresentation of women studying for degrees. However, the case for the expansion of university places made in the Report rested more on the overall figure of only 8 per cent of the 18-year-old age group going into higher education than on the fact that only two per cent of girls in this age group attended. Nevertheless, the recommendation to expand the number of places greatly had a direct benefit for women. Many of those who took advantage of the new opportunities to become graduates were women, since the growth of universities coincided with shifts in attitudes about women's roles promoted by the feminist movement in the late 60s and early 70s. Thus Robbins

helped to shape the social revolution in the role of women during the last three decades of the 20th century.

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