

## Paying for Higher Education

*Michael Barratt Brown  
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*Michael Barratt Brown was the founding principal of Northern College for adult students. In this review article, he explains how mature students are central to wider participation in higher education in the United Kingdom. But their participation has been undermined by the introduction of fees, and is threatened further by huge increases in those fees and other costs as the Coalition Government takes higher education to market. David Browning, former Director of Greater Manchester Open College Network, reinforces the message.*

Roger Brown has had a distinguished career as a Professor or Visiting Professor of Higher Education in six different UK universities. In a recent book, *Higher Education and the Market\**, he has gathered together the contributions of Professors of Higher Education in the United States, Australia, The Netherlands, Portugal, Germany, Finland, Poland and Japan. In all these countries, higher education is paid for from a mixture of public and private funds. In some countries it is mostly privately financed – the US outstandingly, but also in Japan, Korea, Chile, Portugal and Poland. In others public finance predominates, especially in Scotland and The Netherlands and Scandinavia. England and Wales are moving towards a position where the public and the private contributions are roughly equal, the private share including the student's own fee payments. Roger Brown thinks that a balanced provision is good. The result is not then dictated solely in the interests of the state, nor solely for personal advancement or the special interests of the providers of private finance. For the same reasons, financial provision for research, as well as for education, he thinks, should equally be balanced between public and private sources.

Tuition fees have been providing a larger and larger share of Higher Education finance, and Roger Brown is well aware of the danger of a personal, instrumental, consumerist approach crowding out the objectives of public, social benefit. It is, therefore, rather surprising that Roger Brown makes no mention of adult education and the recruitment into Higher Education in the United Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s of large numbers of adult students.

For all universities in Great Britain the average recruitment of mature students was around 60 per cent in 2003-4. This ranged from nearly 100 per cent at Birkbeck and the Open University, 80 per cent at the Welsh universities, to 41 per cent at Oxford, 36 per cent at Cambridge and 22 per cent at LSE. Most of the ex-Polytechnics fell into the 70 per cent to 75 per cent range. This absence of reference by Roger Brown to mature students is the more surprising because he was, for many years, Vice-Chancellor of Southampton University, which had a particularly strong Extra-mural Department for adults and 48 per cent of mature students. A large proportion of mature students not only widens the income range of those graduating, but tends, according to studies on adult education carried out by the Northern College, to bring the children of mature students into Higher Education in families which had never imagined such a possibility.

However, this important progressive development is being undermined. The prospect of a much increased burden of debt, as fees are raised in England and Wales, is already narrowing the income range of entrants into Higher Education, and the cause of much of the current wave of student protests. Roger Brown is well aware of the dangers of what he calls the 'marketisation' of Higher Education and gives his final chapter the title of 'Taming the Beast'. Competition between many different providers may have the effect of guaranteeing quality and reducing inefficiency, but the actual result is to create a hierarchy of institutions, from Oxbridge, down through the Russell Group to the one-time Polytechnics. This hierarchical structure is, of course, only encouraged by the need of students from poorer families to go to a nearby institution, so as to live at the parental home and avoid the accommodation costs of boarding. But there are hierarchies even among the older universities, especially in England, which show up in a smaller proportion of mature students, for example, in Oxbridge, Durham and Manchester, also at St Andrews! What should be engaging Roger Brown's attention is the dramatic fall in mature student numbers with the introduction of fees, even before the Coalition's increases. The National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) estimated a fall of a million from earlier figures. This fall, combined with the emphasis in repaying debt on personal advancement through the higher incomes of graduates, is not going to assure the balanced provision of Higher Education and the dissemination of knowledge for its own sake, and for general social advantage, which Roger Brown is seeking.

*\*Roger Brown (ed.), Higher Education and the Market, Routledge, 2010, 248 pages, paperback ISBN 9780415991698, £24.99*

### **A Response to Jeremy Corbyn MP**

It was disappointing that Jeremy Corbyn's 'Love of learning' [*Spokesman III*] did not extend to *adults* gaining access to higher education, especially when so many of those involved with *The Spokesman* are, or have been, directly engaged in development programmes to achieve precisely that. Jeremy does not specifically exclude adults, but like most writers on access to Higher Education in recent years, it is strongly inferred by persistent references to children and young people. There is an implicit, if not fully acknowledged, political decision lying behind this change of emphasis over the last 15 years.

In the mid-1990s mature students were a majority of those in higher education, with Access to HE courses sustaining that progress. The early years of the Blair government seemed to herald a rich period of adult education development.<sup>1</sup> This was clearly based on developments that were secured throughout previous years of successive Conservative governments: Northern College, Barnsley, and its short course programme; Open College Networks across England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Unison's member education programme and Liz Smith's TUC *unionlearn* developments spring easily to mind.

Early hopes of building on these foundations died when adult education funding fell victim to Labour cuts. Funds were transferred to skills programmes and more than one million adult students in colleges and evening classes were lost. Ironically this was followed by increasing calls for higher proportions of 'young people from disadvantaged backgrounds' to be enabled to enter Higher Education. Ironic, because most adult education experience and much research suggests that *parental* higher education is a critical factor when it comes to successive generations moving from school life into university.

International research<sup>2</sup> has enquired into the influence of families on university entrance and concluded that:

'... families (were not) ... passive ... but ... (possessed) sources of social capital ... not always recognised ... by universities.'

The little noticed, never acted upon Milburn Report<sup>3</sup> concluded that:

'...we would like to see all universities taking into account the *context* of people's achievement ... and ... this project is ... about raising the aspirations of poor *families*.' [Emphases added]

In response to Milburn, Polly Toynbee<sup>4</sup> emphasised schooling and bemoaned the lot of those 'without parents to support them'. Patrick Wintour<sup>5</sup> commended Milburn's proposed fee-waiver for 'mature students

studying at home’, acknowledging adult education’s potential.

One hundred case studies of mature student profiles<sup>6</sup> and learning progression, commissioned by John Denham’s Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, revealed many examples of parents progressing into Higher Education, and their children, and spouses, following them.

With this kind of underpinning support, one is left wondering what might have been the outcome if a Labour government had taken all this evidence, including their own commissioned report, seriously.

*David Browning*

**Notes:**

1 Including: *Learning Works*, Committee on Widening Participation, Kennedy, 1997; *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, Dearing, 1997; and *Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Fryer, 1997.

2 Thomas and Quinn, *First Generation Entry into Higher Education*, OUP, 2007.

3 Commissioned by the Government in 2009.

4 *The Guardian*, 21 July, 2009.

5 *The Guardian*, 20 July, 2009.

6 Provided by tutors and organisers in Further Education, Adult Education, Open College Networks and Trade Union education; edited by David Browning and Michael Barratt Brown, 2009. Our review of the case studies concluded:

‘One important consideration for government policy makers is the obvious effect shown in these studies that adult education experience has on students’ children and their local communities. It is remarkable how many adult students, especially single mums, find themselves doing homework with their children and then encouraging them to go on to higher education. This is an important finding for social policy – in tackling school disadvantage through the adult education of parents. In several of the studies, adult students refer to the fact that they and their children are the first family in the street or village to go to university. Where one or two have pioneered, others have followed.’