

# 35 Revisiting the Robbins Report at 60: education for citizenship versus education for consumerism?

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## Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

## Abstract

The Robbins Report (1963) remains revered as a symbol of state-funded 'social democratic' HE expansion, when HE was understood as a social good to prepare students for citizenship. At the same time the report is apparently contradictorily held by others as heralding the 'marketised' or 'neoliberal' funding regime oriented towards meeting national economic needs.

This paper demonstrates how in the Robbins Report education for citizenship and education for consumerism were intertwined. It argued that students' freedom to choose and to expect a return on investment in their education should be central to the size of HE. But students also needed a broad interdisciplinary education to best deploy their specialisms in the good, free society of liberal capitalism, a society under threat in the shadow of the Cold War. Robbins' holistic assessment of the value of HE points to one way to combat narrow economic assessments of the value of HE.

## Full paper

The Robbins Report (1963) continues to feature prominently in policy debate. Its axiom that HE should be made 'available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment ... and who wish to do' regardless of their class or gender is still passionately defended. The report recommended expanding HE from 216,000 full-time students in 1962-63 to 507,000 in 1980-81. Students would receive a mandatory grant covering the costs of their education. To pay for this, the report calculated the proportion of GNP devoted to HE would need to double. It remains venerated as a metonym for social democratic expansionism.

At the same time, the report is also revered as heralding today's 'marketised' funding regime of student loans. Speaking at events marking the 50th anniversary of the report, David Willetts argued the HE policy implemented by his twenty-first century coalition government was not antagonistic to the vision of the Robbins Report: rather, it extended it. Others supposed that the new 2012 student loans system in England was one that 'Robbins would have approved'. Lionel Robbins was a famous neoliberal economist, a close ally of Friedrich Hayek.

These two funding regimes are often considered as diametrically opposed. The prevailing narrative of the development of HE policy assumes that an earlier post-war interventionist HE regime characterised by high levels of public funding gave way from the 1980s to a 'marketised' regime.

However, histories of post-war Britain are increasingly unsatisfied with such 'rise and fall narratives'. Such narratives depict neoliberalism as too much of a conspiratorial force which seized power in 1979 to resist the progressive redistribution of resources ensuring education for citizenship, or are self-aggrandising stories of policy actors who sought to compel complacent and inefficient universities to respond to genuine, market-indicated national and economic needs for skills. Instead, historians have begun to examine how a more diffuse cast of historical actors in post-war Britain came to accommodate the priorities of the market. This paper re-historicizes the Robbins Report as part of this new appreciation of the dynamism of post-war liberalism.

The existing literature on the Robbins Report tends to assume that the economic case for expansion of HE was secondary to a social case, and that 'the individual citizen, not economic man or the mass consumer, was at the centre of the Robbins inquiry'. However, these categories are not so easily disentangled in the report.

The report was an early adopter of the then unorthodox idea of calculating potential returns on individual 'human capital'. Students, the report held, were inherently capable of knowing and pursuing their best interests. By making an assessment of the return on investment in their human capital, they would participate in the 'division of labour', raise productivity by specialising, and help to engender the prosperous 'good society'. The size of HE, the report argued, should be determined by students' freedom to choose, their 'wish', and not on central government 'manpower' calculations. While grants were initially a necessary state investment to remove psychosocial barriers to young people and their parents, especially of girls, to investing in education, over time as attendance grew the justness of the distribution of the burden of taxation on the general population would diminish. Eventually, graduates should be expected to repay a portion of the cost of their education through a loan.

This did not mean reducing HE entirely to skills acquisition. The report's recommendations were predicated on expansion being in broad liberal courses developing 'general powers of the mind'. The committee were particularly concerned with 'overspecialisation'; while specialisation was a necessary part of the division of labour, it increased mutual dependence whilst decreasing mutual understanding. The committee argued that in order to best make use of the powerful modern knowledge, students needed an interdisciplinary, broad understanding of modern society. In the midst of the Cold War, they particularly meant understanding the virtues of liberal capitalism and the importance of 'freedom' to choose - precisely the same freedom students were exercising in the pursuit of their own self-improvement by attending HE. Education for citizenship and education for consumerism were one and the same.

Revisiting the foundations of current understandings purpose and governance of HE exposes some underlying assumptions that remain prevalent in discussion today. Robbins' holistic assessment of the value of HE points to one way to combat narrow economic assessments of the value of HE, as institutions increasingly market themselves as enabling students to respond to the 'grand challenges' of the twenty-first century - climate change, of AI, and global inequalities.

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