

informal basis, and asked how their procedures could be improved so as to prevent departmental chairs and university appointments panels acting as a force for conservatism in the belief that this would reap RAE rewards. In pursuing these goals it was agreed that SWIP would be working jointly with all those who felt that their branch of philosophy had been inadequately recognized by the last round of the Research Assessment Exercise.

In relation to (3), the most positive way forward was felt to be the development of refereed journals in which non-mainstream philosophical work could be published – one example of this was clearly the *Women's Philosophy Review*. In addition it was suggested that members should take up all opportunities to be involved in editorial processes, as it was only

by participating in existing academic networks that dismissive attitudes to certain kinds of work could be changed. The society needed to be as supportive as possible in making information about grants and bursaries, or publishing opportunities, available to members.

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LETTER

Dearing revalued

'Dearing Boring'? (Roger Harris, 'Dearing Boring: The Massification of Higher Education', *RP* 87, pp. 2–5.) The Dearing Report is the penultimate moment in the commodification of higher education in Britain. It foreshadows a final stage, only shortly delayed while the government prepares the ground with denials of such an intent, of competition between quasi-privatized institutions competing in a segmented market for diploma- and degree-level courses. That final stage will involve a further disaggregation of the sector into elite provision, offering three- and four-year developmental degrees, both generalist and vocational; second-tier, modularized, credit-accumulated qualifications; sub-degree, diploma-level awards; and short courses with credit rating. Institutions and their 'cost centres' will compete nationally and internationally on price and quality, however the latter is audited.

This dystopian vision is not futurology. It is now openly advocated by liberals and postmodernists alike: the liberation of consumer preference, and the freeing of the spirits of the plural fragments, respectively. It is the haunting nightmare of those working in the sector, who are anxious about its implications but are too tired, too dissipated, too compromised by their contradictory positions, or too overawed by the ideology of 'globalization' to do other than acquiesce

in the face of its gradual implementation. It is, moreover, a development only possible in Britain because of Dearing and tuition fees. It is what Dearing was always all about. It constituted the silencing of political debate over the abandonment of the Robbins principle of access on the grounds of ability to benefit rather than ability to pay. Those participating in the Dearing charade, and surprised by the outcome, remind one of Boswell's verdict on scholarly blockheads: 'A scholar who is a blockhead must be the worst of all blockheads because he is without excuse.'

That tuition fees will deter aspirants from poor backgrounds is not, however, the sole or even the chief reason why the Dearing exercise and its consequences are radically inegalitarian. It is rather that the disaggregation of the sector that is to come will foreclose the opportunity for a properly *higher* education for all except perhaps 10 to 12 per cent of the age cohort – that is, less than one-third of those who will be enrolled on degree or other higher-education programmes. This will be the minority whose families are able and willing to pay for coherent programmes of study that provide small seminar discussions with peers, individual personal contact with tutors, time and resources to reflect on and contextualize information and argument, and the other features that characterized

the best of liberal education in Britain in the decades since the Robbins expansion of the 1960s. The commodity purchased by this minority will not simply be a hallowed tradition, or an aura of scholarship, or even a network of influential acquaintances, but rather a qualification highly valued because it will signal its possessor to have experienced genuinely higher learning.

For the majority there will be a narrow vocationalism: expertise in the sciences or the arts but one denuded of significant grasp of the place or moment of the particular aspect of the culture being studied; or an engagement with the humanities that has been wrenched away from their critical potentialities into a 'soundbite' exposure to dissociated fragments justified by misplaced reference to transferable skills, and picked, more or less arbitrarily, from a *mélange* of modules designed to cater for customer taste, and titled by anxious tutors so as best to distinguish them in an internal market. This is not well described as a regression since it has no antecedent in post-school education. It does have its analogue, however, in the trinal division of secondary education into grammar, technical and secondary modern schools.

For others, access to these new commodities may not even require their physical presence in a university, or any direct contact with tutors or peers. University administrations in Britain will be looking with interest at recent reports from UCLA concerning the requirement for all academic staff to establish a Web site on which all their course materials must be deposited, and which all students must use, having been charged a supplementary fee. This material is, then, as university copyright, marketable by the institution and its commercial partners for distance learning. They will be similarly intrigued by the pay cuts for the casualized staff of the New School in New York consequent upon staff compliance with the requirement to provide digitalized course units for that institution's virtual students. They will be less heartened by the news of the recent successful two-month strike against such developments by the tenured faculty at York University, Toronto.

It is for these reasons that the government's response to the Dearing Report can and should be fought. The aspiration for a universal higher education that is not disaggregated into the best, the worthy, and the worst is both desirable and feasible. It ceases to be feasible only if there is an acceptance (as with one of the central premisses of Dearing) of the government's fiscal and departmental priorities ('no' to tax increases;

'yes' to the European Fighter Aircraft), and/or with an acceptance of the 'globalization' thesis, and the purported transformation of public services as well as all tangible products into internationally tradeable commodities.

Universal higher education only ceases to be desirable for those who would celebrate the dissolution of the search for, and dissemination of, standards of cognitive authority, for those for whom all authority is simply another form of power; or for those who consider the education of 40 per cent or more of each age cohort to a higher level to be a waste of resources, justifiable only if narrowly vocational. Undesirable as well for those who, also accepting the government's priorities, and concerned only about intra-departmental distribution, consider publicly funded universities to be elitist institutions offering perks to the middle class by depriving of adequate resources a working class which is to be found primarily in further and adult education, according to this quaint stratification.

While resistance to these developments in British higher education needs to challenge government policy, it has also to take issue with this alliance of postmodernists, liberals and the confused meliorists who are captured by such sub-sociological notions of 'class'. It must also deal with the doleful spectators who, to excuse their compliance, either make a necessity out of a reactionary policy (and perhaps will soon reinvent it as virtuous), or deny the distinction between a higher-education service that has a considerable social cost but no price to its consumers, and one in which knowledge is a commodity traded for a price in the market.

Resistance does not, however, require one to treat the post-Robbins period as a golden age; to subscribe to the liberal theory of higher education as a disinterested search for knowledge via the values of truthfulness, free inquiry, and civility that the ideology suggests as the basis for its academic 'community'; or to seek a Nietzschean detachment 'remote from the noise of carts and the cries of street-vendors'. It requires precisely the opposite: an understanding of the role of higher education in relation to the wider society. It requires an appreciation of the renewed resources for resistance created by the new demands being made on the sector. But in the first place, it requires tutors and students and other staff to fight the central feature of Dearing: the imposition of tuition fees.

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