

Extracts from: The Dearing Report (1997) 'Higher Education in the learning society' Main Report

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(Extracts from) Chairman's foreword

1 We were appointed with bipartisan support by the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland on 10 May 1996 to make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research. We were asked to report by the summer of 1997.

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An introductory comment

6 We were appointed to advise on the long term development of higher education. But we express here our concern that the long term wellbeing of higher education should not be damaged by the needs of the short-term.

7 We are particularly concerned about planned further reductions in the unit of funding for higher education. If these are carried forward, it would have been halved in 25 years. We believe that this would damage both the quality and effectiveness of higher education. We are also concerned about some other immediate needs, especially in relation to research.

8 We recognise the need for new sources of finance for higher education to respond to these problems.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ron Dearing". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font. The "R" is large and loops around the "on". The "D" is also large and loops around the "earing".

Chapter 20 Student support and graduate contributions

20.1 If our vision of a learning society is to be realised, students will have, as we make clear in Chapter 18, to make a greater investment in their own futures. It is also necessary, if our vision is to be realised, for the state to provide equitable financial support for students who want to study in different ways or whose personal circumstances require it.

20.2 The country should have a student support system which, as far as possible:

- is equitable and encourages broadly based participation;
- requires those with the means to do so to make a fair contribution to the costs of their higher education;
- supports lifelong learning by
 - making the choices between full and part-time, and between continuous and discontinuous study financially neutral;
 - reducing the disparity between support for students at further and higher education levels;
- is easy to understand, administratively efficient and cost-effective.

20.3 This is not straightforward to achieve given the diversity of students and study patterns which need support.

20.4 As we have already shown, more funding is needed for higher education. Levelling up the support for those types of students or patterns of study which are not currently well-supported would be very expensive, and impossible to achieve within the constraints of public funding. It might also risk substituting public subsidies for contributions which are currently coming from employers towards part-time study. Reducing support for those groups who are currently better supported could lead to severe financial problems for individuals, especially if they had not had time to prepare for changes and might thereby reduce participation, especially by students from the least well off backgrounds. Consequent changes in behaviour could be destabilising in their effects on institutions. Our recommendations have, therefore, been tempered by pragmatism.

20.5 In this chapter we examine how far it is feasible to provide better support to certain groups of students:

- part-time undergraduates;
- postgraduates;
- students in institutions which are not publicly funded;
- students whose study is not continuous.

In the light of our conclusion that graduates in work who have benefited from a full-time undergraduate course should make a greater financial contribution in the future, we then consider:

- the need for payments to be on an income contingent basis;
- the relative merits of
 - a graduate tax;
 - a deferred contribution scheme;
 - contributions supported by loans;
- the relative merits of four specific options for contributions supported by loans;
- various approaches to increasing the money which loan supported schemes can provide for higher education over the short term;
- certain special cases.