

The Society for Research into Higher  
Education and the changing world of  
British higher education:  
a study of SRHE over its first 25 years

Michael Shattock



Dr. Nicolas Malleson, outside the Society's  
first office in Woburn Square.



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## The founding of the Society

The SRHE was born out of the ferment in the world of British higher education that had been generated by the Robbins Report. The Report had recommended that research in higher education should be encouraged by Government and by private foundations and that the Government's statistical services should be required to collect and analyse education statistics on a uniform basis (Robbins 1963, Recommendations 168 and 169). The Robbins Committee itself had pioneered research in a previously largely barren field in surveys of undergraduates, postgraduates, teacher training college trainees and students on advanced courses in further education, on the allocation of staff working time between teaching, research and administration, and on a sample of 21 year olds some having entered higher education and some not. It emphasised that the collection of ongoing data was an essential aid to policy decisions. However, the central argument of the Report was about its forecast of future student numbers, and the excitement which it stimulated was about expansion, the elevation of the entitlement of appropriately qualified young people to be able to enter higher education to be recognised as if it was an automatic extension of the provisions of the welfare state and about the economic benefits to the nation of encouraging increased entry into higher education.

If the Robbins Report, published in October 1963, created the climate for the establishment of the SRHE it was not the intellectual driver. This came from a different source, a concern about the health and welfare of the student body. Robbins had published damning figures about student wastage rates ranging from 5% to 36% in some technological subjects (Robbins, Table 50) but saw them primarily as a function of numerical consistency with past academic practice which required reform rather than from the point of view of the individual student's interests. Dr. Nicholas Malleon, the University of London Student Medical Officer and Director of Research in Student Problems, and the acknowledged inspirer and founder of the SRHE, approached the subject from a different standpoint. Jane Abercrombie, a close colleague, wrote that before Malleon university medical officers dealt with cuts and bruises but he moved into the space occupied by academics being concerned over the reasons for failure and drop out and what she calls "the shadowy borderlands between medicine, sociology and psychology" (Abercrombie 1978). Prior to moving to the University of London post, Malleon had been physician in charge at UCL where he conducted research on the 1948-51 student cohort. UCL tried to discourage publication of his finding that wastage at UCL was as high as 27%. He concluded that "each department has its own culturally acceptable notion of a proper wastage rate", and that if the figure was too high it believed that the marking was too steep and if too low, that standards were slipping (Malleon 1972). This was exactly the conclusion reached by Robbins. His research interests, as expressed in his publications, lay primarily in student health, student wastage issues and the management of stress including stress associated with examinations.

Malleson applauded the Robbins call for more research into higher education. Ernest Rudd, who had been appointed at the new University of Essex to head a Unit for Research into Higher Education, recalled a conversation with Malleson in late 1963 in which Malleson stated that he wanted to create an organisation “to bring together the researchers [in higher education] and those who were users of research, whether as teachers, administrators or civil servants” (Rudd 1978 page 191) and in March 1964 he took the initiative to call a public meeting in the form of a conference entitled “Research into Higher Education after Robbins” held at the University of London Senate House to discuss the idea. This was followed by an inaugural meeting of what was to become the SRHE in December 1964, held once again at the Senate House, by which time he had secured support for the initial running costs of the organization from the Acton Society Trust.

The membership of the initial governing body of the Society, elected at the December meeting, comprised:

President: Sir John (later Lord) Fulton, Vice-Chancellor of Sussex University

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Chairman: Dr. Nicholas Malleson, Research Unit for Student Problems, University of London

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Vice-Chair: Lady Ethel Venables, educationalist, Aston University

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Treasurer: Dr. Ernest Rudd, Unit for Research into Higher Education, University of Essex

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Secretary: Roy Manley, Acton Society Trust

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Members: Dr. Lionel Elvin, Director, Institute of Education, University of London  
Dr. A.H. Halsey, Department of Social and Administrative Studies, Oxford  
Professor Hilde Himmelweit, Department of Education, LSE  
Professor R.K. Kelsall, Department of Social Studies, University of Sheffield  
John Madge, PEP (Partnership for Economic Policy)  
Professor C.A. (later Lord) Moser, LSE  
Dr. Cyril Bibby, Principal, Kingston upon Hull College of Education  
Professor Graeme Moodie, University of York  
Dr. Henry Walton, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh

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This was both a distinguished and a potentially influential group: Fulton was vice-chancellor of the first and most glamorous of the 1960s New Universities, Venables, a respected educationalist and the wife of Sir Peter Venables, vice-chancellor of Aston University one of the newly upgraded technological universities, Rudd, a sociologist, was head of one of the two higher education research units set up post-Robbins, with Moser, the architect of the statistical research undertaken for Robbins, the head of the other at LSE, Elvin

had been a member of the Robbins Committee. Halsey was to become one of the UK's most influential sociologists, adviser to Tony Crosland the Secretary of State at the DES and author of major books about higher education, Kelsall had conducted the research programme commissioned by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (Kelsall 1957) which led to the creation of the Universities' Central Council on Admissions (UCCA), Moodie, a political scientist, was to write, with Rowland Eustace (later the Society's administrator) the ground breaking *Power and Authority in British Universities* (1974). A notable fact was that only three of the 13 members could be described as professionals in the discipline of education and the membership was primarily drawn from people whose academic interests in higher education were based in other disciplines. It should also be noted that the membership was heavily biased towards university interests in higher education. Crosland had yet to make his Woolwich Speech announcing the binary line but the existence of higher education outside the universities had been well rehearsed in Robbins but was here represented by only a solitary principal of a teacher training college.

The role of the Robbins Report in serving as the touch paper for a Society interested in research in higher education was emphasised in Fulton's speech at the conclusion of the Senate House conference. Discussing the change of mood in educational research he said:

*“There can be little doubt of the part which the Robbins Committee played in changing it. As its work proceeded, drawing more university interest and cooperation, great areas of ignorance were revealed for all to be aware of; and the Report itself provided such light in the dark places of the past that few would regard it as tolerable to be without a continuing scrutiny in the future”. (quoted in Greenaway 1973)*

The formal aims and objects of the Society “to promote and encourage research into higher education and its related fields” sought to match the Society to the new climate of interest in higher education research but, in fact, the actual programme of activity which the governing body adopted was considerably more ambitious. This included holding an annual conference, holding seminars or setting up working parties at national, regional and local levels to examine research issues, publishing bulletins which would help to rationalise overlaps in research programmes, encouraging publication through its own publishing house and bringing together a central register of information published and unpublished. This represented an extensive range of activity and was underpinned by a small pump priming grant from the DES for 1966-68. The Society established itself in accommodation at 2 Woburn Square (a house now demolished) above Malleeson's consulting rooms.

## The Society's early years

In the wave of enthusiasm generated by Robbins the Society seemed to thrive. By December 1965, when its Memorandum and Articles were signed registering it as a limited company, it had 58 corporate and 300 individual members. The existence of so many corporate members, mainly individual universities, emphasised the Society's quasi official status as the accepted national umbrella for higher education research. In 1966 it appointed an Organising Secretary, Dr. Bob Oxtoby (later Principal and then founding Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bolton). In 1969 when his successor, Hilary Black, resigned she was replaced by two appointments, Harriet Greenaway as the Administrator and Susan MacIntyre as Publications Officer. By 1971 corporate membership had risen to 179, 55% of which were universities (home and overseas) and 22% colleges of education, polytechnics or other 'public sector' institutions, and 368 individual members, up to 10 of whom were students.

But as the original impetus of the Robbins Report diminished and the hard realities of limited resources for the promised expansion of student numbers, the restriction imposed on university growth by the creation of the polytechnics, the massacre of the teacher training college sector together with the 1973-74 oil crisis and the inflation that followed it, the optimism that accompanied the founding of the Society seemed to falter. Malleon's ideas, as described by Rudd, "generally showed breadth of vision rather than attention to detail" (Rudd 1978 page 195) and Malleon, himself, gradually withdrew from the detailed running of the Society and resigned from the chairmanship in 1968. The Society moved its premises to Gower Street in the following year. A substantial number of the Governing Council membership had also moved on and the membership in 1968-69, now increased by co-options to 16, retained only four of its original members.

One of the difficulties was the absence of funding for higher education research. The Robbins programme of research had been generously supported by the Treasury but alternative sources of research funding were almost impossible to find. The DES, where the controlling influence was Toby (later Sir Toby) Weaver, was not sympathetic to universities. The new Social Studies Research Council, founded in 1965, which might have been expected to take an interest in higher education research did not do so, and the Foundations tended to see higher education research as being off the agenda after the acceptance of the main Robbins recommendations about expansion. (The grant by the Gulbenkian Foundation to Graeme Moodie for research on university governance which led to his book with Rowland Eustace referred to above represented a notable exception). This meant that individual scholars turned away from higher education back to whatever was their first discipline and the Society was itself denied opportunities to undertake major research programmes as a corporate body. The Governing Council had approved the formation of five study groups on university teaching methods, professional examinations, innovation, subject monographs and the conditions and careers of research workers but only the group on innovation,

effectively, innovation in teaching, was sufficiently developed to apply for external funding. The Society thus became entirely dependent on membership fees, conference income and the uncertain income deriving from its publication list. The Society was just able to balance its books but it had no spare resource to invest to stimulate activity. By 1973, when the university system was in crisis with the collapse of the quinquennial funding system, it was clear that the Society was significantly failing to meet the ambitious targets it had started out with: it held annual conferences but attendance at 100 to 120 ensured that any surplus was low. It had successfully launched the valuable *Research into Higher Education Abstracts* but its publication of monographs, *Research into Teaching Methods in Higher Education* (Beard 1967), *Objectives in Higher Education* (Beard, Healey and Holloway 1968), *Aims and Techniques of Group Teaching* (Abercrombie 1970) and *Technical Aids to Teaching Higher Education* (Flood Page 1971) while influential among specialists did not command a wide readership.

The Society appeared to be at a crossroads as to its future: so far it had succeeded in expanding its membership, both corporate and individual, but this could easily be reversed if it failed to generate sufficient activity to retain it. Early in 1973 the Governing Council agreed to hold a special meeting on 11 July to consider the issues and commissioned a paper from Leo Evans, one of its members, and Harriet Greenaway, the Society's Administrator, to stimulate ideas. The "Discussion Paper on the Objectives of the Society", although originally intended to deal with organisational structural issues, in fact addressed much wider questions and, in particular, the direction in which the Society had been moving since its creation. It quoted the aims set out in the Articles of Association "to promote and encourage research in higher education and related fields" and argued that the Society's objectives needed to be broadened. It made a particular point that the members of the Governing Council "are elected largely for their already close personal involvement in research. This means that members have come mainly from education departments of universities" (Evans and Greenaway 1973). The implied thrust of the paper was that the Society had become too narrow in its research interests and that it should be more willing to address issues related to the development of the higher education system.

Fortunately the Governing Council authorised that a very full record of the ensuing discussion should be kept so it is possible to trace the variety of views expressed. Essentially there was a division of views, one group arguing for the maintenance of a pure research focus primarily linked to teaching and learning (Gerald Collier, Ernest Rudd, Henry Walton, Colin Flood Page, John Heywood among the speakers) while the other wanted to broaden the Society's interests (Gareth Williams, Alec Ross, Leo Evans, Harriet Greenaway). Williams argued that the Society needed to be more broadly based and to be interested in policy and development making the point that there was a considerable amount of research into higher education which the Society was not in contact with (presumably at LSE and at Lancaster, where he was

now a professor in Ross' department). Evans summarised the discussion as “polarising between the view in favour of a small esoteric Society publishing classical research and the view that the Society should try for a wider appeal by publishing reports as well as research. He would support the latter position”. In response, Rudd argued that the evaluation of developments was simply a news function and Heywood called for a greater interest in teaching methods and quoted approvingly the Nuffield Foundation's work under the heading Research and Innovation. As discussion continued it concentrated more on the constitutional point of the inclusion of the word 'development' into the Society's aims and objectives than on practical steps for implementing any change of direction. The amendment to “to promote and encourage research into, **and development in** higher education and its related developments” was agreed at the AGM in the following year.

### The end of the Robbins era

The change in the Society's aims and objectives did not, however, release a burst of new energy amongst its members. Both in 1973-74 and 1974-75 there was great concern about the Society's continued financial viability, and in 1976 the Society moved its premises out of London to the University of Surrey where it was offered favourable terms. These were bleak years for higher education as a whole, particularly for the universities, as expansion slowed and inflation constrained institutional budgets. The post-Robbins enthusiasm had been entirely dissipated. SRHE's response was primarily in relation to the impact on the quality of education that institutions were able to provide. Early in 1974 Gerald Collier, Principal of the College of the Venerable Bede at Durham had put forward a paper “The Reorganisation of Higher Education - A machinery for monitoring changes” which argued for the need “to formulate a scheme for the monitoring of developments in higher education with special reference to the need of decision-making bodies for well found evidence on the educational influence of new types of curriculum and organisation” (Collier 1974). He advocated the creation of a council, with an external chair, and a membership drawn from the representative bodies in higher education plus the Leverhulme and Nuffield Foundations. This crystallised into an idea for a Higher Education Development Council which was discussed with the DES, the University Grants Committee (UGC) and other bodies, but in the unpromising financial climate no funding for such a body was available. In 1977, however, the Society returned to the idea by establishing a Higher Education Development Group chaired by Tony Becher and comprising David Billing, Gerald Collier, Lewis Elton, John Heywood and Roy Niblett, which produced a paper entitled “Maintaining academic quality in a period of retrenchment”. It argued that “Our urgent need in a period of stasis ....is to bring closer attention....to bear on the question of how to stimulate creative thinking in relation to teaching and learning as part of a common concern to safeguard teaching standards”(Becher *et al* 1977). The paper



was written for a joint meeting with the UGC and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) but once again elicited no funding support although the CNAA indicated it would support a bid to the DES.

Both the Collier and the Becher papers were written very much from within the dominant academic culture of the Society and, in a financially strained environment it was perhaps not surprising that they were unable to garner the necessary support from official bodies. However, the climate was about to change with the publication of the DES' and Scottish Education Department's (SED) Higher Education into the 1990s A Discussion Document (1978) (the so-called 'Brown Paper'). Two things distinguished the document. The first was that instead of presenting a clear forecast of future student numbers in a situation where demographic projections pointed to a fall in the student population it envisaged mitigation through three alternative models of increases in the age participation rate. The second was that it invited discussion about 14 questions it posed about the future size and shape of higher education from the higher education community and perhaps particularly from those undertaking research into higher education. Publication was followed by a well attended conference addressed by the Secretary of State, Shirley Williams, which generated a lively open ended discussion. Stimulated by an informal meeting convened by Peter (later Sir Peter) Scott, Editor of the Times Higher Education Supplement, Gareth Williams, now the chairman, proposed to the Governing Council at its meeting on 16 June that SRHE should seek to sponsor an Enquiry into Higher Education which would consider "the structure of higher education in the future and... research into higher education on an international scale". Acceptance of the proposal, although an affirmation of the majority position adopted by the Governing Council and the AGM in 1973 and 1974, represented a radical break from the past in the culture of the Society and was a reflection of the extreme disenchantment with Government policy towards higher education at the end of the Robbins era.

The Governing Council established a working party to consider the feasibility of the proposal. In its report in 1980 the working party expressed the view that:

"The fundamental problem facing post-secondary education during the next two decades is not demography but loss of confidence: loss of confidence by school leavers in the private benefits of higher education, loss of confidence by politicians in the social benefits and often loss of confidence by academics in their own sense of purpose. These problems may be exacerbated, but they are not created by public expenditure constraints... The Robbins Committee which reported in 1963 took the academic year 1981-82 as the limit of its projections and recommendations. This alone makes it timely to undertake a new comprehensive review of the system". (quoted in Williams and Blackstone 1983 pp 19-20).

## The Leverhulme Programme of Study into the Future of Higher Education

Of course, it was always understood that such an Enquiry would have to be financed from outside the Society. The Society's finances had not improved since the earlier 1970s and its 1978 annual conference, "A Decade of Change", had attracted only just over 100 participants. The climate for a much broader discussion of the future of British higher education and the recognition that research could play a part in policy formation, however, had significantly changed attitudes within the Society. In January in the following year a bid for an Enquiry into Post Compulsory Education in the UK until the year 2010 was submitted to the Gulbenkian Foundation. It was based on the fact that the Robbins forecast of student numbers was effectively due to run out in a year's time and that even the most optimistic scenarios in the DES/SED document implied a decline in numbers in the 1980s. Its objective, as described in the bid, was:

"To investigate the present situation and possible alternative patterns of post-secondary education in the UK with particular emphasis on the period 1980-2010 and to make recommendations about strategies for future development in the light of educational, social, economic and political realities of the period".

This was a Robbins exercise under another name that would commission a series of state of the art surveys and on the basis of the evidence make recommendations. The bid was turned down. The next approach was to form a joint working party with the Policy Studies Institute which prepared and submitted a bid to the Leverhulme Foundation for a Higher Education Commission. In February 1980 Williams reported that the Foundation had reacted favourably but further discussion within the Society and with Leverhulme and a recognition of the likely costs involved suggested a change from the Higher Education Commission approach to "an interlocking set of seven or eight seminars based on substantial reviews of the literature, extending over two years" (Governing Council Minute 13 June 1980). The topics proposed were Higher Education and the Labour Market, Demand and Access, Governance and Structure, Research, Mechanisms of Finance, Rationalisation and Institutional Viability and Policies for the Future, with a question mark over The Teaching Function. Williams was to be Director of the Programme but the Governing Council appointed a Research Advisory Committee to work with him. The Programme was funded to the tune of £250k by the Leverhulme Foundation with some additional support from the DES for the seminars on Mechanisms of Finance and on Governance and Structure, and from the Gulbenkian Foundation for an additional seminar on The Arts and Higher Education. The grant, and the Programme was to run from May 1981 to May 1983.

The final shape of the Programme that emerged was radically different from the Higher Education Commission approach but in practice much more appropriate to the times and to the contribution that the Society could realistically make to the evolution of policy on higher education which, by this time, had been

greatly disturbed by the threat of the cuts likely to be imposed as a result of the Thatcher Government's first and second budgets. Each seminar was to be convened by a carefully selected Convenor, who would be an expert in the field, and would be chaired by a distinguished senior lay person to ensure that a view from the wider world was injected into the discussions. The Convenor would select the individual contributors after discussion with the Director and the chair. The individual contributors would be paid a fee for their written text which would be published by SRHE in volumes covering each seminar. Attendance at the seminars was by invitation in order to preserve a balance of views and expertise but individual members of the Society could apply for places and in practice it proved to be perfectly possible to match demand. The membership included industrialists, civil servants, members of research councils, vice-chancellors and distinguished experts from overseas, notably from the US, some of whom also contributed papers to the seminars. But to ensure wide dissemination of the conclusions the *Times Higher Education Supplement* was given licence to publish an exclusive supplement reporting on each seminar as the Programme progressed. It was the intention that the final report should carry the imprimatur of the lay chairman of the seminars in order to command attention from the public, Parliament and the Government.

The outcome of the Programme was the publication of the following monographs:

*Higher Education and the Labour Market* (Editor: Robert Lindley, Manpower Research Unit, University of Warwick, the seminar being chaired by Sir Michael Clapham former President of the CBI and Deputy Chairman of ICI)

*Access to Higher Education* (Editor: Oliver Fulton, University of Lancaster, the seminar being chaired by Sir Adrian Cadbury, Chairman of Cadbury and Cadbury Schweppes)

*Agenda for Institutional Change in Higher Education* (Editor: Leslie Wagner, National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB), the seminar being chaired by Sir Alistair Pilkington, Chairman of Pilkington Glass)

*The Future of Research* (Editor: Geoffrey Oldham, Director of the Science Policy Research Unit at Sussex, the seminar being chaired by Sir Keith Durham, Chairman of Unilever)

*The Arts in Higher Education* (Editor: Kenneth Robinson, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the seminar being chaired by Christopher (later Sir Christopher) Ball, Keble College, Oxford)

*Professionalism and Flexibility for Learning* (Editor: Donald Bligh, University of Exeter, the seminar being chaired by Sir Bruce Williams, Director of the Technical Change Centre and former vice-chancellor of Sydney University)

*Accountability or Freedom for Teachers?* (Editor: Donald Bligh, the seminar being chaired by Sir Bruce Williams - the Teaching Function Seminar generated two volumes)

*Resources and Higher Education* (Editors: Alfred Morris and John Sizer, University of Loughborough, the seminar being chaired by Sir Kenneth Berrill, Chairman of the Securities and Investment Board, and former Chairman of the UGC and of the Central Policy Review Staff)

*The Structure and Governance of Higher Education* (Editor: Michael Shattock, University of Warwick, the seminar being chaired by Lord Crowther Hunt, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford and former Minister of State for Higher Education)

*Response to Adversity*, Gareth Williams and Tessa Blackstone

*Excellence in Diversity – Towards a New Strategy for Higher Education* signed by the chairs of the Seminars

The first nine of these volumes comprised the researched papers commissioned by the Convenors of the seminars, revised as necessary after the event, an introduction and conclusion by the Convenor and a set of recommendations agreed by the seminar itself. The final two volumes comprised a set of conclusions drawn from the whole Programme reached by Gareth Williams and Tessa Blackstone (who became Deputy Director of the Programme) presented in *Response to Adversity* and a broader more strategic report in the names of the chairs of the seminars embodied in *Excellence in Diversity*. The impact of the latter volume which had been intended to represent the residual parallel to a Higher Education Commission report was weakened by two developments. It had been intended that the final seminar to be held in December 1982 to agree recommendations derived from the whole Programme would have been chaired by Lord Scarman, Lord Justice of Appeal and Chair of the Court of the University of London. It was hoped that his public record of major reports might have provoked a rather more probing discussion than actually took place but he withdrew and his place as chair of the final meeting was taken by Christopher Ball who was, by this time, chairman of NAB and might have been thought to be internal not external to higher education as was the original intention. Moreover a report by a group, however distinguished, led by him was less likely to have had an impact on Government than if it had been led by Lord Scarman. The second development was that Bruce Williams, one of the chairs, chose to write a note of dissent in respect to some of the recommendations.

This is not the place to analyse the recommendations either from the individual seminars or from the last two volumes. Peter Brooke, the Minister for Higher and Further Education called it “probably the most systematic review of higher education policy [in the UK] by an organisation outside Government that has ever been undertaken” (Brooke 1983). In the short term the Programme had benefited from interest created by the inquiry into the future organization of higher education conducted by the Parliamentary Select Committee for Education, Science and the Arts under the Chairmanship of Christopher Price, MP which reported in late 1980, and from the uproar generated by the cuts in higher education the following

year. But the real strength of the Programme lay in its format described by one very distinguished US participant as “the rolling Leverhulme crap game” (quoted in Shattock 1985) and the fact that it involved such a wide cross section of policy makers both from outside as well as within higher education. (The two DES civil servants in charge of higher education and further education and a director of a large local authority education service were among the list of those asked to comment on the draft of the recommendations contained in *Excellence in Diversity*).

The last two volumes did not attract the headlines in the way the Robbins recommendations did - they were not intended to do - but as Scott wrote, “What Leverhulme has evolved is a way of thinking about and discussing future options for higher education that leaves room for a variety of perspectives” (Scott 1983). Moreover, the quality and range of the research papers prepared for the seminars and reproduced in the volumes listed above represented a summation of the issues consequent on the end of the Robbins era together with a set of proposed solutions based on research, analysis and discussion amongst an expert cross section of the sector. Although the most radical and controversial proposal in *Excellence in Diversity*, a broadly based two year pass degree to be followed by a discretionary further honours year or a masters degree in substitution for the conventional three year degree structure was rejected both by the universities and by the Government, the recommendations for an Academic Review Board quickly received a response from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (now Universities UK). It established the Academic Standards Group under Professor Philip Reynolds whose reports led to the creation of the Academic Audit Unit and ultimately to the QAA. And the report from the seminar on research in its call for a separation of recurrent funds for teaching and for research and for the UGC to be selective in the allocation of research funding led on to the first research selectivity exercise in 1985. But perhaps more important than the detailed recommendations was the fact that the Programme opened up higher education policy issues for public discussion in a comprehensive way that had not been attempted since Robbins.

One major reason why the Leverhulme exercise did not remain a talking point throughout the 1980s was because it was overtaken by the Secretary of State’s request to the UGC and NAB to give him public advice on a strategy for higher education. Both bodies engaged in extensive consultation covering very much the same ground as the Leverhulme Programme but their advice was largely ignored in the disastrous Green Paper, *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES 1985). The Green Paper was so at variance with the spirit of the Leverhulme Programme and the reports from the UGC and NAB that it created a new strongly politicised agenda for higher education which raised a new set of issues which had to be addressed. For all that the Programme remains a landmark in UK higher education policy making not least because it was undertaken independently of Government.

## The Society in the 1980s

The Leverhulme Programme represented a shot in the arm for the Society both in terms of short term financial support and in terms of longer term public recognition. In parallel, a number of reforms to the Society's governance and management took place which improved its internal effectiveness. In 1978, when Gareth Williams took over as chairman, the Society was at a low ebb. Its auditor warned that it was in danger of over trading and its governing council was inward not outward looking. Williams presented a paper entitled "Reorganisation of the Society for Research into Higher Education" (Williams 1979). This proposed the creation of an Activities Committee, intended to broaden the scope of the Society, and that this committee, together with the Research and the Publications Committees, should be given delegated powers of decision-making thus ensuring that proposals could be acted upon quickly and not be readdressed every time at Governing Council. The proposals were agreed (and remain a key element in the Society's present governance structure) and had the added benefit of opening up decision-making to a wider membership than could be accommodated on the Governing Council. His report also echoed concerns dating back to 1973 in arguing that the Society must attract more "ordinary academics with a strong interest in teaching and learning....who are academic practitioners but not necessarily theoreticians of higher education"(Williams 1979).

In early 1980 the Governing Council appointed a new Secretary (later to become Director) of the Society, Rowland Eustace, a scholar of higher education of some standing and a former senior university administrator. As a first task he was commissioned to undertake a review of the administration of the Society and particularly its finances. His report showed how dependent the Society was on its subscription income, both corporate and from its 250 members, and on income from publications (although this was already showing itself to be a loss making activity). The Leverhulme Programme had been a financial bonus: it covered half the salary of the Publications Officer, injected a significant number of volumes into the market, which itself contributed to the retention of corporate members who received them free of charge for their libraries, and gave the Society a considerable reputational boost which in the short term brought it back into surplus. Eustace's report was followed in 1981 by a paper by the next chairman, Donald Bligh, entitled "New Policies for SRHE" (Bligh 1981) which reiterated the concern over the Society's failure "to capture the interest of the ordinary teacher in higher education. Consequently it has, at times, become too dominated by the small group of higher educationalists like me in 'staff development' who have their own concerns and language" (Bligh 1981). To increase the reputation of the Society, he argued, it must become more visible. These concerns were in part met by the Leverhulme Programme and Eustace's skill in managing the finances ensured that the Society developed a reserve fund which could buttress any short term descents into deficit.

An important element in this was the decision to cease to be an independent publisher and to move into partnership with an established publication house. Although the Society had had some notable successes in publications outside the teaching and learning field, for example Renate Simpson's *How the PhD came to Britain* (1983) and Whitburn, Mealing and Cox' *People in Polytechnics* (1976) a majority of the most distinguished books by members of the Society such as Halsey's (with Martin Trow) *The British Academics* (Faber and Faber 1971), Moodie and Eustace's *Power and Authority in British Universities* (Allen and Unwin 1974) and Kogan and Becher's *Process and Structure in Higher Education* (Heinemann 1980) had been published not through the Society but by commercial publishers. The partnership with first the NFER and then with the Open University Press gave the publications side of the Society's work a new lease of life. Self doubts were to remain, however, and at a special meeting of the governing council held at the FE Staff College at Blagdon in 1987 a report on the membership, unsigned but probably written by Eustace, could still say that "general knowledge and understanding of the Society remains relatively low in higher education despite attempts over recent years to give the Society a higher profile".

The Society had, on the other hand, established itself as an important voice in policy. It was addressed by higher education Ministers (William Waldegrave 1982, Peter Brooke 1983), at an SRHE/THES Conference on the Green Paper by Sir Keith Joseph the Secretary of State, in 1985. Most unusually it received a visit from the former Prime Minister, Edward Heath, in February 1983 who wished to seek the Society's advice about higher education (unfortunately before the publication of the final volumes of the Leverhulme Programme). He sent, in advance, a list of questions which read as if they had been drafted for him by Keith Joseph:

- To what extent (if any) has the balance between disciplines been inappropriate for Britain's economic needs?
- How far should the labour market determine the shape of higher education?
- Are research and teaching indivisible in higher education if standards are to be maintained? Is it better to have a few research institutions or many, given financial constraints?
- Is the binary line appropriate?
- Are the links between higher education and industry poor by comparison with other major countries?
- What are the merits of shorter courses - two years liberal arts followed by two years vocational?

The interest of these questions is both the extent to which the issues were addressed and answered in the Leverhulme Programme and the fact that their underlying assumptions formed the basis of the 1985 Green Paper. It was clear that the Society was at the sharp end of discussions about the future policy.

This interest in higher education development and policy was sustained after the closure of the Leverhulme

Study by two activities begun during Michael Shattock's chairmanship. The first was an Enquiry which the Society launched under the leadership of Graeme Moodie, a member of the first governing council, on Questions of Quality which provided the theme for the 1985 annual conference and a subsequent book, *Standards and Criteria in Higher Education* (Moodie 1986). The second was the establishment of the SRHE Forum, a policy seminar which met five times a year under the alternate chairmanship of Michael Shattock and Gareth Williams. The aim of the seminars was to bring together representation from the main agencies in higher education, including DES staff, with members of the Society engaged in research and writing about higher education. A supplementary aim was to bridge the trans-binary gap and to discuss higher education policy issues as a whole and not on a sectoral basis. The success of the seminars which ran for over a decade can be judged by the seniority of the speakers, from current ministers, Opposition spokesmen, chairs/chief executives of the UGC/Universities Funding Council (UFC) and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), the Managing Director of BP (on the aims of the Council for Industry and Higher Education, which he chaired) the permanent secretary of the DES (after retirement), the deputy secretary for higher and further education (on "Changes in the distribution of power in HE") and a host of academics who had written works of topical interest (e.g. John Ziman on "Science in a steady state" and Tony Becher on "Academic tribes"). These seminars had two important effects: they helped to break down the gap between researchers and policy makers and they contributed to the formation of a policy community which was non-binary in its constituency.

### The modern SRHE compared

By 1990 the Society was in a much stronger position than it had been a decade before. Membership, both individual and corporate had improved, its finances, though never affluent, had stabilised, its three publications (*Studies in Higher Education*, *Higher Education Quarterly*, (previously *Universities Quarterly* which it had taken over from Blackwells) and *Research into Higher Education Abstracts* commanded general respect, it offered a balanced agenda of interests to its members from pure research to an engagement in policy formation and this was reflected in attendance at its annual conferences. It is not the purpose of this account to offer a narrative of the next 25 years but it is useful to draw some comparisons in a situation where the higher education system has doubled in size. The Society, which struggled to break even financially in its first quarter of a century, is now in secure surplus and with comfortable reserves. It is no longer heavily dependent on corporate membership, which had declined sharply as a result of the reductions in institutional budgets over the 1990s, and subscription income, corporate and individual, contributes no more than just over 20% of its income while about 50% comes from publications, over 40% from a single source, the journal *Studies in Higher Education*



which successive editors have brought to a very high level of international esteem. It offers members an outstandingly informative Newsletter. A reflection of the enthusiasm of the membership is that the Society supports 12 separate special interest networks. By comparison with its early days the annual conference attracts an attendance of around 350 and over 200 paper contributions.

If we ask, however, where the balance of the Society's activities lie it remains, perhaps surprisingly, still strongly rooted in the kind of agenda which it followed in its early years. Thus more than half of the papers contributed to the annual conference are in the field of teaching, learning, curriculum and the student experience while less than a quarter are devoted to policy issues and only about 5% to governance and management topics. Part of the explanation for this lies almost certainly in the general concern in the modern period that policy has moved increasingly upstairs, both institutionally and nationally, and that the gap between policy makers and researchers, which both the Leverhulme Programme and the SRHE Policy Forum attempted to bridge, has widened to a dangerous extent. There can be no doubt, however, that in 2015 the Society has a much more secure base than it had in 1990 and is flourishing in a way that its founders in 1964-65 could only have dreamed of. The Society may not be so engaged in wider policy issues as it became in the 1980s and early 90s but it remains committed to the internal world of higher education in ways which resonate with the ideas of Nicholas Malleon and his colleagues when they founded the Society in the white heat of the post-Robbins debates.

## A Note on Sources

The official SRHE Archive is held in the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick under files MSS 323 1/1-3 and 1/4. The Archive was deposited by the Society in the mid 1980s but has not been added to in recent years. The rest of the Society's records are held at its offices at 73 Collier St, London N1 9BE. In addition to a record of Governing Council and other committee papers the Archive contains a substantial record of the Leverhulme Programme together with a copy of the invaluable *Students in Need – Essays in Memory of Nicholas Malleson* edited by Donald Bligh in association with Jane Abercrombie, Michael Kendall, Grace Laker, John Payne and Agnes Wilkinson. The only other significant document on the early history of the Society is Harriett Greenaway's "The Work of the Society for Research in Higher Education" in Butcher, H J and Pont H B *Educational Research in Britain 3* London: University of London Press 1973 pages 328-344.

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Since its formation in 1965, the Society for Research into Higher Education has developed considerably. Whilst it remains committed to its original aims of 'promoting and encouraging research into higher education and its related fields' it now engages with a far broader, more international range of researchers, practitioners and policy makers from a wide variety of disciplines.

Amongst its many activities the Society:

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*Society for Research into Higher Education*

*Advancing knowledge Informing policy Enhancing practice*

73 Collier Street  
London N1 9BE  
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7427 2350  
F +44 (0)20 7278 1135  
E [srheoffice@srhe.ac.uk](mailto:srheoffice@srhe.ac.uk)

[www.srhe.ac.uk](http://www.srhe.ac.uk)

Director: Helen Perkins  
Registered Charity No. 313850  
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