

Can Higher Education in the UK Live Up to Its “Potential?”

Following the publication of the report - “Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education” (also known as The Browne Report after its author, Lord Browne of Madingley) on 9th December 2010, the United Kingdom government passed legislation to move the burden of financing study in higher education from the State to the student.

The objectives of The Browne Report were aimed at providing an extensive review of the future direction of Higher Education funding in the UK. Its goal was to:

“...make recommendations to ensure that teaching at our HEI’s is sustainably financed, that the quality of that teaching is world class and that our HEI’s remain accessible to anyone who has the talent to succeed.” (Browne, 2010, p.2)

However, a reflective analysis of the recommendations in the report indicates a potential, secondary outcome with less sought-after consequences carrying implications beyond financing. These changes (preceded by the earlier abolition of the student loan in 1997 and the introduction of tuition fees in 2004) along with the additional, personal, financial investment involved, could mean that the decision to undertake study at university level by students from lower income households and other ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds may be not only put off by the increase in debt but also may be discouraged or even precluded from entering higher education by the market driven

This presentation will firstly outline these contrasting ‘economic’ and ‘social’ objectives and critically explore the implications of the two key documents the Browne Report and the subsequent governmental response in the White Paper “*Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*”, (BIS, 2011) for the access and widening participation agenda in England. Secondly, we will explore institutional differentiation around how the introduction of the £9,000 student fees could affect how widening participation is viewed and the notion of individuals with ‘potential’ is deconstructed. Finally, we will present a theoretical model for the use of HEIs and schools to identify ‘potential’ higher education success stories arguing that the overall approach is robust but conceptual and operational development is required.

Both the Browne Report and the White Paper take fairness as one of the central goals of the proposed reforms to higher education admissions. They further link fairness to the expansion of participation and the increased presence of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. They do not, however, offer an explicit definition of “fairness,” nor do they offer an account of how expanded participation, especially on the part of the disadvantaged, contributes to it. This omission is significant. One could, for example, simply admit quotas of students by

socioeconomic class as a means of expanding participation. If this approach would not increase fairness—if it would, in fact, work against fairness—then the relationship between fairness and participation must be at least moderately complex. To understand this relationship properly, a third concept central to both the Browne Report and the White Paper—*potential*—is needed. Fairness requires admission to higher education on the basis of potential, and only potential. An unfairness takes place when a student is either able to obtain access to higher education, or is denied that access, on another basis, such as social class or willingness to pay.

This understanding of fairness, we argue, is implicit in both the Browne Report and the White Paper. Neither document, however, offers more of a definition of “potential” any more than “fairness.” Moreover, it is difficult to extract a definition from these documents in a straightforward way. We believe, however, that such a definition is vital if any serious evaluation of higher education reform is to take place. To this end, we develop in this presentation a fourfold conception of potential. We develop this conception by drawing upon ideas offered in the Browne Report and the White Paper (even though those ideas do not always fit comfortably together). Our conception of potential rests upon the concepts of *ability*, *aptitude*, *aspiration*, and *achievement*. Applicants to higher education must possess both the natural talent (*ability*) and the motivation (*aspiration*) to succeed in higher education. But ability must be cultivated. This cultivation requires aspiration, and cannot succeed without ability. Through attainment, an applicant demonstrates both ability and aspiration. Attainment provides the basis for predicting success at higher education, success that would be impossible without both ability and aspiration. Finally, to succeed in a particular course of study, a student must demonstrate aptitude for it; this aptitude reflects a specific orientation, rather than a general ability to complete higher education. We conclude the presentation by proposing a research agenda focused upon the conceptualization and measurement of this fourfold conception of potential on the one hand, and the development of the policy implications of this conception on the other.