

Framing Higher Education: Questions and Responses in the British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983 – 2010

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Introduction

Higher education is viewed by both the public and policymakers as an important route to upward social mobility (e.g. Milburn 2012)ⁱ. We use the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey as a lens through which to view policy changes and map attitudes towards higher education. From a policy perspective, opportunities to fulfil one's potential, for example through education, need to be open and fair (National Equality Panel 2010, 4). Public perception, as documented in responses to surveys such as the BSA, considers a good education fundamental to personal achievement. Indeed, 72 per cent of BSA respondents in 1987 and 74 per cent of respondents in 2009 thought education was essential or very important in 'getting ahead'ⁱⁱ. Overall, education ranked second only to hard work, which was selected by 84 per cent of respondents in both years (reference anonymised).

The BSA survey series began in 1983. With the benefit of hindsight, the early 1980s can be characterised as a relatively stable time in higher education policy. The major expansion of the higher education system following Robbins (1963), and the founding of the Open University (1969), had already occurred. The division between polytechnics and universities remained, with the debates that would lead to the end of this divide in 1992 still some years away. This stability contrasts with the more rapid policy developments in higher education in the 1990s and 2000s which saw the

change from a free-tuition, grant system to an upfront tuition fee system (1998), then to higher deferred tuition fees (2004) and, finally, fees of £9,000 per year (2012) accompanied by a return to bursaries and a strong discourse of social mobility through higher education access (Milburn 2012).

The presentation explains the changing higher education policy context in England. We then analyse how changing policy discourses were mirrored in the framing of survey questions on higher education in the BSA. Furthermore, we investigate the link between current attitudes towards higher education and respondents' social position. Our combination of a linguistic content analysis of survey questions with statistical analysis of the responses allows us to bring together reflexive and empirical insights and recognises that changes in respondents' answers are in part constructed by the changing questions posed to them.

Our findings show how the discussion of higher education funding and benefits shifted between the Robbins, Dearing, and Browne reports, with increasing emphasis placed on the private rather than public benefits of higher education. The Browne report in particular introduced new elements of marketisation into higher education (Ref anonymised). Simultaneously, there has been an increasing focus on the widening participation agenda in higher education, linking this to discourses regarding social mobility.

We investigated how the changing public discourse surrounding higher education has been reflected in changed formulations of BSA survey questions over time. Our linguistic content analysis of the BSA questions illustrated how changing social and political discourses and realities determine the questions posed by researchers as much as they determine public responses to them.

The early BSA survey questions tended to carry positive presuppositions, enquire about social justice, and assume that higher education was a public good rather than a private investment. However, in more recent surveys, cynicism about higher

education expansion has crept into questions, with respondents being increasingly reminded of its expense and possible devaluation as a result of massification. Questions about fairness in the admissions process have largely disappeared.

Ironically, our analyses have shown that responses to the questions neither reflect nor justify the shift in their content and tone. Despite higher education increasingly being presented in negative light, respondents still seem able to recognise its value. Even when presented as a private good, respondents remain aware of its public worth. This suggests that media discourses and also some aspects of the Browne report may not be an accurate reflection of how British society regards higher education.

In our empirical analyses of BSA questions on higher education in 2010, we found support for some of our hypotheses regarding self-interest and attitudes. Those who had themselves benefitted from a university expansion acknowledged that it had been worthwhile but opposed future expansion. Those who had attended private schools were generally also in favour of a reduction in higher education. Those with children at home were more hopeful that graduates would get a good job than those without children. However, the responses according to social class and educational qualification are more complex. On the one hand, people's attitudes reflect and reinforce the life-choices they have made. Working class respondents are less likely to have a strong view on the actual value of a university education, perhaps because they have less personal experience of university and its benefits. Graduates thought that university was worth the time and money, whereas those with no qualifications disagreed. Many of the responses by social class and qualification status thus map onto the actual life-choices people made. Gendered attitudes to higher education expansion are also striking. Here, male respondents are significantly less positive about expansion or the benefits of higher education than female respondents. This is in line with our hypothesis, and these less positive male attitudes towards higher education may also be reflected in the lower levels of male participation in higher education.

Turning to the responses to attitudes towards expansion, it is striking that working class respondents favour an expansion in university opportunities, whereas graduates strongly favour a reduction in opportunities. Working class respondents might aspire for their children to have opportunities they themselves did not enjoy, whereas graduates are more in favour of pulling up the ladder behind them and decreasing opportunities

This 'pulling up the ladder' argument is supported by the private school findings. Those who attended private schools are in favour of a reduction of university places and think that universities may not be worth the time and money. In line with our hypotheses, Labour supporters were more inclined to support an expansion of educational opportunities than Conservatives. Liberal Democrats' views were similar to those of Labour supporters.

Implications for social policy are not clear-cut. The BSA survey results indicate that, according to public opinion, higher education opportunities should be more widely available, and that the optimum proportion of young people attending university should exceed its current level.

Strikingly, to win the argument for a marketised higher education system, arguments supporting the higher education as a public good tend to be downplayed. Policy decisions therefore focus on 'cost-sharing' measures, invoking the assumption that public funding disadvantages lower earners because the (participating) middle classes must be effectively subsidised by the (non-participating) working classes. What this analysis of BSA data shows is that popular support for higher education expansion is not always dulled by such self-interest. Comparisons could be made with popular support in the UK for the NHS, which is not necessarily predicated on self-interest (i.e. whether the respondent is in need of treatment) but rather reflects a broader sense of communal good.

In conclusion, our paper highlights the widening gap between public and policy discourses regarding higher education and social mobility on the one hand, and public

opinion on the other. Support for higher education as a public good and route to opportunity remains strong, especially among those who have so far benefited least.

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Table 1: Key publications and dates in English higher education, 1963-2013

Year	What?	Impact
1963	Robbins Committee Report	Triggering higher education expansion ‘Robbins Principle’ established that university places "should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment"
1965	Binary system introduced ²	Higher education system split into universities and polytechnics
1969	Open University founded	Aims to bring high quality degree-level learning to people who had not had the opportunity to attend traditional campus universities First successful distance learning university worldwide
1992	Further and Higher Education Act	Polytechnics and colleges incorporated as universities (end of binary system) Attempt to create a comprehensive (unitary) university system
1998	Teaching and Higher Education Act (following Dearing Report of 1997)	Means tested up-front tuition fees of £1,000 introduced Living cost maintenance grants replaced by loans
2003	White Paper: ‘The Future of Higher Education’	Target to increase higher education participation, to re-introduce grants, and to abolish up-front fees, recommends Access Agreements to improve access for disadvantaged students
2004	Schwartz Review	Five admissions principles established, including selection on ability and potential

2004	Higher Education Act	Introduction of variable fees (£0 to £3,000) Up-front fees replaced by income-linked deferred payment. Establishment of Office for Fair Access
2011	White Paper 'Students at the heart of the system' (based on Browne Review of 2010)	Variable fees of up to £9000 per year introduced. Universities charging fees of over £6000 per year required to contribute to a National Scholarship program. Sanctions for not meeting widening participation targets Threshold for loan repayment increased from £15,000 to £21,000. Part time students become eligible for loans. Upfront government loans for fees and maintenance Means tested grants for students from lower income families.

Table 2: Responses to the question 'a university degree guarantees a good job', responses in column per cent

	2005(%)	2010(%)
Agree strongly	3	2
Agree	32	29
Neither agree nor disagree	23	27

Disagree	35	35
Disagree strongly	6	6

Table 3: Responses to the question: ‘Out of every 100 young people in Britain, how many do you think should go on to a university or college?’

Answer	Frequency (%)
No young people should go on to higher education	0
Between 1% and 10%	1
Between 11% and 20%	6
Between 21% and 30%	11
Between 31% and 40%	15
Between 41% and 50%	16
Between 51% and 60%	17
Between 61% and 70%	10
Between 71% and 80%	9
Between 81% and 90%	3
Between 91% and 100%	4
All young people should go on to higher education	0
Don't know	6
Refusal	1

Table 4: “This question is about two young people with the same A/A2-level (or Scottish Higher) grades applying to go to university. One is from a well-off background and the other is from a less well-off background. Which one do you think would be more likely to be offered a place at university?”

	2002 (%)	2003 (%)
Well-off person	42	43
Less well-off person	2	4
Equally offered place	43	41
Can't choose	9	9
Not answered	1	1

Table 5: Attitudes towards higher education opportunities, by demographic characteristics

	Higher education opportunities ...			
	...should be increased (%)	... are about right (%)	... should be reduced (%)	<i>Number of observat ions</i>
Sex				
Female	38	46	13	608
Male	34	46	19	473
Occupational status				
Professional / managerial	34	39	26	163
Intermediate	33	45	18	361
Working class	38	50	10	351
Missing	~	~	~	38
Qualification level				
Degree or higher	28	40	30	182
Below degree level	40	45	14	426
No qualifications	31	54	11	211
missing	~	~	~	94
Respondent's schooling experience				
Only state school	38	47	13	952
Some private school	24	42	30	129
Child in the household				
Yes	42	45	12	377
No	32	47	18	704
Party identification (Conservative)				
Conservative	28	46	25	299
Labour	41	47	11	315
Liberal Democrat	39	42	16	138
Other, none, Missing	39	46	12	329
All	35	46	16	913

All percentages are weighted to take into account of sample biases. This is a requirement for the analysis of BSA data. However, the frequencies are raw frequencies representing the actual number of observations for each category. Analysis of valid responses only. Where rows do not add up to 100 per cent this is due to missing data or no-response.

Table 6: Multinomial logistic regression models predicting attitudes towards higher education participation

BSA question 2010		opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education - to a university or college - should be				whether a university degree guaranteed a good job				“University education is not worth the time and money it usually takes”			
Response category	... increased	... reduced	...agree	...disagree	...agree	...disagree							
Omitted reference category, response variable		... are about right				...neither agree nor disagree'				...neither agree nor disagree'			
Below: Predictors (Reference category in brackets)	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	
Intercept	-.57	.57	-1.95**	.81	.52	.68	1.42**	.64	-.06	.72	-1.18^	0.62	
Gender (female)					.14	.19	-.03	.17					
Male	-.17	.15	.53***	.20					0.71***	0.21	0.24	0.17	
Social Class (intermediate)													
Professional	.20	.22	-.15	.26	-.39	.28	-.02	.24	-.047	0.32	-.005	0.25	
Working	.16	.17	-.63***	.25	-.29	.22	-.28	.21	-.81***	0.25	-.044**	0.20	

Qualifica tion (Some qualifica tion)												
Degree	-.36^	.20	.61***	.24	-.20	.24	.03	.22	0.17	0.30	0.65***	0.24
No qualificati on	-.28	.21	-.45	.29	.13	.28	.36	.26	0.82***	0.31	-0.13	0.26
Children at home (now)												
Yes	.00	.16	-.36	.23	-.29	.20	-.39**	.19	-0.42^	0.23	-0.23	0.19
Schoolin g (all state)												
Someone Private	-.48^	.25	.51**	.25	.05	.28	-.02	.26	0.76**	0.33	0.51^	0.28
Party identific ation (Conserv ative)												
Labour	.31^	.19	-.88***	.25	.58**	.24	-.04	.22	0.62**	0.27	0.73***	0.22
Liberal Democrat	.37	.24	-.55***	.30	.30	.29	-.32	.27	0.35	0.37	0.90***	0.28
Other, none, Missing	.16	.19	-.55***	.24	.27	.25	.03	.22	0.34	0.26	0.12	0.22

N	1049	907	886
Chi	135.587***	46.85**	112.01***
DF	28	28	28

***p < .001; ** p < .05, ^p < .10. We also included the following response categories in the statistical model underlying the table: age and age squared, missing education information, and social class missing. None of the missing factors were statistically significant and are omitted from the table above.

i These perceptions are supported by some, but not all empirical evidence (e.g. Stuart 2012; but Lindley and Machin 2012; cf Goldthorpe and Mills 2008).

ii The BSA survey question (asked in 1987, 1992, 1999, and 2009) was ‘To begin with, we have some questions about opportunities for getting ahead... Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life....important is...coming from a wealthy family? ...having well-educated parents?...having a good education yourself?....having ambition? hard work?.... knowing the right people?....having political connections?....giving bribes?...a person’s ethnicity?...a person’s religion?...being born a man or a woman?’