

2012/55

22 October 2012

Pocket Watch – Progress on widening participation in HE

Introduction

The Government claims that by 2015 it will be spending nearly £1bn a year trying to attract disadvantaged students into HE but according to Alan Milburn whose latest social mobility Report was published last week, *"a new level of dogged determination is needed if progress is to be made."* Widening participation remains a hot topic. It attracts strong opinions in the school sector, HEFCE and OFFA are due to present a shared strategy on it shortly, while earlier this year OECD put things into perspective by calculating that in 2020 there will be more than 200m 25-34 year olds with degrees across the OECD and G20 countries of which 40% will come from China and India alone. The message is clear: no country can afford to ignore any of its talent

Five recent policy concerns

A lot's been done in HE to advance social mobility but five policy concerns stand out:

- The long-term impact of the fee rise particularly on disadvantaged groups
- Whether enough resources are being allocated for HE (and will continue to be so)
- The impact of the number controls mechanisms, AAB and so on
- The dismantling of the EMA system
- The failure to require schools to offer one-to-one careers advice for young people

The headline proposals

Taking the standard 4 stage student 'life-cycle' of thinking about going to university, applying, staying the course and progressing successfully at the end, the Report comes up with a number of recommendations. The most eye catching, and in some cases contentious, include the following:

- The creation of a new university led fund to help disadvantaged students stay on at school and get the results needed for entry to university. Sounding a bit like a university version of the late lamented EMA, the view is that better dividends may come from directing more disadvantage funding to schools rather than universities
- The provision of guaranteed interviews and where appropriate, lower offers to disadvantaged applicants along with stronger supply chains through sponsored Academies and other providers
- A dedicated pool of public funding along the lines of the Pupil Premium where disadvantaged students could attract additional levels of funding
- The creation by 2014/15 of an agreed set of contextual data that could be used in admissions processes
- The introduction of bridging or foundation programmes that could help ease the transition into higher education and which could be converted into degree programmes when necessary
- The introduction of league tables highlighting progression rates and employability skills
- A review of postgraduate funding with a view to introducing a fee loan system



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Milburn Social Mobility Report. Oct 2012