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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