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## Pocket Watch – HE's High Five

### Introduction

Five Reports in the last few weeks suggest that HE is moving up the policy agenda. Three of these Reports, those from **million+**, **Universities UK** and the **University Alliance** respectively focus on funding and this clearly remains a critical issue. Other issues include widening participation, reported on in a recent **Paper** from HEFCE and OFFA, HE's contribution to the economy, currently under review by Lord Witty, regulation, and more generally where HE is heading in the future. IPPR's Commission on the Future of HE which launched its **Final Report** this week, offers an interesting perspective on this. In all five 'challenges' emerge

### Five critical issues

1. **Funding.** Clearly top of the bill with concerns ranging from the outcomes of the spending review, to Treasury costs and accounting, long-term sustainability and future government policy generally. Million+ argue that there are alternatives including a costed £6000 model and a new form of graduate tax. University Alliance call for more of a dual system, part publicly funded, part market funded while the Commission consider a range of options including changes to loan repayments, a graduate tax, employer sponsorship, low-cost alternatives and a greater use of technology. The big problem, as UUK point out, is the lack of stability in the current market, neither fish nor fowl, managed or open and at the mercy of both uncertain recruitment trends and as in visas, political positioning
2. **Access and entry.** Latest UCAS application figures are up on last year though still well down on 2011 and still, as indicated, proving difficult to rely on for planning purposes. Reports this year have variously highlighted concerns about downward trends in foreign, mature, part-time and postgrad learners but the wider issue of access and widening participation remains, particularly for school leavers. HEFCE/OFFA's Access Report gives some idea about how much is being invested in this area although much of it relates to the pre 2012 fee position. Clearly some of the lower fee alternatives might help here, as might the use of contextual admissions data but the Commission's proposal of a £1000 student premium for those from low-participation areas is clearly another interesting option
3. **HE and the economy.** Lambert, Wilson and now Witty, all leading figures who in recent years have led high-profile reviews on HE-business relationships. HE contributes well over £3bn to the economy according to latest figures but the current environment as indicated in the Witty remit is rooted in a new sector and locally based industrial strategy. Recommendations from the Commission include £5000 fee only vocational degrees, a new network of Applied Research and Innovation Centres but most prominently perhaps, the return of the Poly, if not in reality at least conceptually
4. **Regulation.** Another important area as the HE market diversifies and different forms of provision let alone customer relationships emerge. Both the Commission and University Alliance call for a single regulatory system, in effect a single agency overseeing a single framework but strengthened in both cases to be able to guarantee standards, protect customer interests and safeguard the UK's position in the global market
5. **The future.** The \$64,000 dollar question. It's clear from these Reports and elsewhere that the market has become a driving mechanism but as the Commission recognise, it's not the only one. Indeed, to adopt a phase, an avalanche is coming. How far HE survives it will depend on how it deals with many of the above issues



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**Setting the sights for HE June 2013**