

New Labour's neoliberal *Gleichschaltung*: the case of higher education

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This paper was written with the idea of inducing thought, reflection, and discussion on the Government's recent "White Paper in Higher Education". As authors of the paper, we welcome its circulation as widely as possible. Feel free to make multiple copies, to circulate the electronic version (as appropriate), or anything else that may provoke further discussion of the issues raised within. The fate of national education is too important to left to a Government "consultation exercise".

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Orientations

“We are in a period of considerable social change. There will be unrest, but we can cope with the Toxteths... but if we have a highly educated and idle population we may possibly anticipate more serious conflict. People must be educated once more to know their place” (Department of Education official in a leaked secret report, 1983)

“What appears as extraneous “politicalisation” of the university... is... the “logical”, internal dynamic of education: translation of knowledge into reality, of humanistic values into humane conditions of existence... The educational demands thus drive the movement beyond the universities, into the streets, the slums, the “community”. And the driving force is the refusal to grow up, to mature, to perform efficiently and “normally” in and for a society which compels the vast majority of the population to “earn” their living in stupid, inhuman and unnecessary jobs” (Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969, p. 66).

“One can envisage education becoming less and less a closed site differentiated from the workplace as another closed site, but both disappearing and giving way to frightful continual training, to continual monitoring of worker-schoolkids or bureaucrat-students.” (Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming”, *Negotiations 1972-80*, New York, Columbia, p. 175.)

Most progressives will of course have scaled down their hopes for New Labour long ago. Gone, it seems, the promise of a sunny upland of social democratic let alone socialist measures designed to redress the already dismally one-sided relationship between “business” and the rest of society. Gone too the expectation that the worst excesses of the Thatcher years and the Major Interregnum would at least be recognised as warranting some redress. Instead we seem to be on the cusp of a new wave of policies designed to push further forward the neoliberal agenda associated with the Tory Years. This has been pursued incompetently, if consistently, in the case of transport (particularly the railways), in the case of the post office, in the sphere of benefit reform, and in the case of foreign policy where Blair’s studious coveting of the title of “most loyal American” has seen Britain in the vanguard of the US’s continued global hegemony. After six years of New Labour rule Britain is the envy of the *neoliberalistas* in Europe as elsewhere. Yet there is still ambivalence about the nature of the New Labour “project”. Progressive commentary in Britain still seems inclined to regard New Labour as in essence well-meaning, if in practice given to fetishising the capacity of the market to deliver reforms of a social democratic nature (think of Polly Toynbee’s columns in *The Guardian* or Will Hutton’s in *The Observer*). We, however, think the time for “reasonable ambivalence” is long gone, and thus that the “project” has to be looked at for what it: the reduction of public life to a means for accumulation and profit creation, which is in turn the very essence of the “neoliberal” revolution experienced across the developed and developing world.

We think the recent widely discussed *White Paper in Higher Education* gives the clearest possible indication of this trend, developing as it does an account not only of what public services are “for” (support for “business” and “enterprise”), but also of what kind of subject is to be produced by it (customer, “investor”). Education policy expresses at the deepest level the hopes and aspirations of any governing party. It tells what kind of “justice” it wishes to nourish, how it sees “equality”, opportunity and citizenship developing. As New Labour itself declared on coming to power, the three priorities for the new government were, famously, “education, education, education”. Given the extent and scope of the “revolution” in HE it was to be expected that New Labour’s true colours would be revealed in this particular sphere of “public” life. Few however could see just how far New Labour was prepared to depart from its own social democratic traditions, or quite how preposterous the

assumptions it would attempt to paper over with its talk of “increasing diversity”, “access”, “participation” and a “vibrant civic society”. Indeed one of the features of the Paper is not merely the familiar jargon, but the overtly impositional terms in which the case is put. The implication is that, *pace* Thatcher, there is no “alternative”. The White Paper may in this sense be a consultation document, but it is written in terms that closes down meaningful dialogue rather than welcoming it, that offers its findings as *ex cathedra* statements based on the “inevitability” and “necessity” for radical change and thus which seeks to impose a model on the university system rather to foster a climate in which whatever change is felt to be needed can take place consensually or democratically. It is part of a discourse of the kind known in Gramscian theory as “passive revolution”: a discourse where, in lieu of attaining support for what it is doing, a government instead decides to act as if it alone were the origin of social change. One should notice, for instance, the section on “What happens next?” (p. 93). The government has kindly deigned to give us a period for comment, but the next stage is “[e]arly legislation to underpin the proposals” and after that, “[i]mplementation of the strategy”. In other words, they intend to go ahead regardless of what goes on during the period for comment: they will let us speak, but they won’t listen.¹

Forced to be “free”

With reference to the above, we should say something about the language of the document. Rhetorically, the government presents the White Paper in an exciting language of “freedom”, “choice”, “opportunity” and “progress”. For instance, the government is offering universities “greater freedom” (19), presenting “a radical picture of a freer future” and promoting a “move towards new freedoms” (21). “[I]nstitutions need real freedom - including the freedom to raise their own funding, independent of government”². Of collaborative research projects, it says: “we want to encourage them to grow organically over time” (29). In this way, it is trying to connote something which it cannot deliver on a denotative level. In fact, the entire plan is built on coercion and manipulation, mainly using government control of resources to

¹ We are happy to confirm that a version of this paper was in fact submitted to the “consultation exercise”. Indeed we received a polite (standard) reply thanking us for our “contribution” to the debate.

² It is possible that the term “freedom” in such passages is a code-word for “privatisation”. This is certainly consistent with its usual occurrence in statements dealing with economic issues, and the idea that “real freedom” means fund-raising in the private sector. It would also be consistent with Thatcherite usage. Needless to say, the idea that one is “free” by being part of a market economy depends on a mistaken assumption that economic competition is the essence of human existence. A university “freed” from government funding may nevertheless be enslaved by the conditions attached to funding elsewhere. This may mean less “real” freedom - in the sense, for instance, of freedom to direct scientific research based on a desire for new knowledge rather than a desire for higher profits for some biotech company - than if the government remained the main source of funding. The government is being careful not to discuss “privatisation” of universities at this stage, but the moves towards financing systems independent of the government and the emphasis on links with business suggest it may be a concealed goal. In Australia, the introduction of fees and other neo-liberal policies by a previous Labour government has paved the way for attempts by the subsequent National/Liberal government to privatise universities.

bribe and blackmail those involved in HE as well as future students into conforming to the government's agenda. It is a fundamental attack on the autonomy of universities, and an attempt to bring the higher education system under co-ordinated government control. So, on one level, the government thinks "it is reasonable to ask students to contribute" to the costs of higher education (2, c.f. 76), but on another, what it means is not to "ask" but to demand. The word "ask", after all, implies a right to say "no" without serious risk; otherwise, a better term would be to "threaten" or "impose". They write of "partnership between students, government, business and the universities" (3), yet this is no such thing: it is being imposed by one partner, in the interests of another, over the heads of the other two. They write that "we need to help individuals to make sensible and appropriate choices" (58), when clearly the use of resource distribution to ensure people do what the government wants is anything but "help". And on the next line after saying that they want collaborations to "grow organically over time", they state that they intend to achieve this by "reward[ing] research that is more concentrated and better managed" (29). This is not so much "organic growth" as mechanical engineering using behaviour modification. That "freedom" in the government's discourse is in fact no such thing is clear from the claim that "[g]reater freedom... will compel institutions to improve their efficiency and management" (80). Since when has freedom been something which compels? This is a freedom to submit, a "free[dom] to take responsibility" for one's "financial future" (76). In other words, it is not freedom but its opposite: subordination to those who hold one "responsible" for one's "financial" situation.

There is also a pretence here that the government is simply enabling events to take their own course. For instance, the government aims to "allow" universities "to compete with the best" (3), and thinks that students should "be able to contribute" to the costs of education (76). To "allow" is, again, the language of freedom: it is as if the government is simply releasing universities to do what they would anyway want to, at their own discretion. Yet this is precisely not what they are doing: universities are to be cajoled into adopting the kind of subjectivity the government demands, with explicit and implicit threats of being stigmatised or refused funding if they don't. The case is even clearer regarding tuition fees: students are being forced to pay them, not simply allowed to do so. In another passage, plans to divide universities into different levels and kinds are portrayed as "a funding regime which enables each institution to choose its mission and the funding streams necessary to support it" (20). Yet the choice of "missions" is the government's own, and it is by no means clear that those assigned to the vocational and teaching routes are thereby being "enabled". This term is appropriate only if they have a choice. When the government specifies how governments are "enabled" to access the funding streams, it comes to look more like control. "Universities [are] to put in place systems to ensure and demonstrate that their research is financially sustainable" (25). "[U]niversities will have to show that they are operating sustainable research businesses through recovering the full costs of research" (25-6). "[W]e will ask

HEFCE to look at how funding for departments with lower ratings... can be related to potential to progress further, and linked to good planning for future improvement” (32). The government also wants “high minimum standards for the training of PhD students which must be met before higher education institutions can draw down funding for PhD places” (33). Being forced - “having” - to conform to a neo-liberal image of oneself as a “business”, enforced by the threat of losing funding, is not freedom or enablement, but coercion into a system of control and limitation.

If the government really wanted to “ask”, “allow”, “enable” and raise “freedom”, its first concern would be to ensure that students, staff and institutions have extensive choice whether to remain with the status quo, adopt the government agenda or try some other course of their own choosing. However, the whole of the government’s proposal is about pressuring, cajoling and forcing people into adopting the measures the government has decided it wants. In a more honest moment, admit that they are “steering” some universities towards the “mission” the government wants by “rewarding” them (26) and “providing appropriate incentives” (28) - and, presumably, by withholding “rewards” and “incentives”, i.e. funding, if they don’t. Again, to encourage joint research, the government will “provide funding which will incentivise the formation of productive collaborations” (30), and to “incentivise both the supply of and the demand for foundation degrees” (61). The funding it provides will presumably come at the expense of those who would otherwise have received it³. Indeed, the document specifies that funding for foundation degrees will be “in preference to traditional honours degree courses” (61). In another passage, the government admits trying to “develop the way we use public funding so as to stimulate greater success and higher quality” (92). That no-one in the government has pointed out that this is the opposite of “freedom” is a sign either of unlimited arrogance or unremitting stupidity⁴.

When the government decides that funding is no longer an entitlement but something conditional on conformity to the government’s agenda, the effect is a reduction in freedom. This attack on universities’ freedom is not negated by the government simply redefining funding as conditional “rewards” and “incentives”. Indeed, given that the level of control

³ An example would be the proposed increase in the stipend for research council-funded PhD students, including both a general rise and targeting of “shortage subjects”. Notwithstanding the threat to student choice implied by the attempt to push people into particular areas of research through inequalities in funding, it is not made clear how this rise will be funded. This implies that it means that the government will be paying more money to fewer students, and that the overall number of funded PhD students will be reduced. This is hardly a route to “opportunity” and “freedom” for students, nor a way of “building research excellence”.

⁴ One of the Orwellian “freedoms” offered in the government proposal is the freedom (expressed by the word “allowing”) “to spend less time on bids [for research funding] that do not have a realistic chance of success” (98). Under the present system, institutions and individuals are at complete liberty to refrain from putting in any bid which they feel to be unrealistic and not worth the effort. The change under the proposed system is not that they are “allowed” to refrain (as if driven on by a neurotic compulsion to submit unrealistic bids), but that they are not permitted to do anything else.

over resource distribution is increased by such a redefinition, it makes more sense to refer to “punishment” of institutions and staff through the withdrawal of what was previously available. In the context of research funding, the government explicitly admit to trying to render bids more conditional (98). The plans contained in this White Paper amount to an attempt to transform utterly the existing higher education system so as to build something more in line with a neo-liberal agenda. “We believe that these stimuli are necessary to break the traditional pattern of demand”, they urge, emphasising that such an attack is needed to “serve... our economy’s needs” (62). To ensure that people perform their assigned role as cogs in the capitalist machine, their desires for education beyond the capitalist model must be “broken”. This is not about freedom. It is about control and repression.

The same approach is involved in attempts at “performance management” through “strategies for pay”. This way of “rewarding good performance and tackling poor performance” (52) - the latter mentioned in a typically euphemistic way - is a form of control from the outside, manipulating “behaviour” by setting up hurdles for funding which was otherwise either more fairly distributed or automatic. Methods advocated include “pay differentiation”, “market supplements” and “other differentiated means of recruiting and retaining staff” (52). The image involved is very strange, since such manipulation is supposed to begin a “cultural change”. Such claims are later echoed by discussions of “raising aspirations” (69). Clearly, however, the methods involved are methods of administrative manipulation, not methods of cultural persuasion and encouragement. For instance, the way in which aspirations are to be raised is by offering a small sum of money to impoverished students on condition they sign a “learning agreement” and conform to a rigid system of controls on the hours they work⁵. This shows how a project of control is being disguised as a project of “cultural” improvement. In fact, the “cultural” result will either be a resentful (superficially compliant or openly defiant) workforce or else a “culture” of submission to the government.

The other main method the government relies on is control through the surveillance, recording and distribution of “performance” figures. “Raising standards” is a slogan the government likes, because it is one of those phrases it is very hard to disagree with. Yet what it really means is not qualitative improvement, but the reduction of services to measurable,

⁵ We are here referring to the “Education Maintenance Allowance” discussed in Box K. Such apparently positive measures should be viewed in the dual context of, on the one hand, the abolition of general maintenance grants and, on the other hand, repeated attacks on benefit claimants and the low-waged by the government and capitalists. Their net effect is to render student support increasingly conditional, meagre and unsatisfactory. It may be, for instance, that those who receive Emma’s are the same socio-economic group who would have claimed benefit while studying, before this was made impossible by the introduction of regimes of regulation of claimants. It is no longer possible for a benefit claimant to study in further education, except for some specifically accredited vocational training courses, because such a claimant would not be instantly available for work and would not be able to commit sufficient time to the dour routines of interviewing, employability

government-controlled criteria. This often leads to a deterioration in quality as people rig their activity to produce indicator-friendly outcomes. “There will be regular reassessments so that as strong new institutions and consortia develop they can also be recognised as leading institutions; and so that institutions which cannot maintain their leading status are not sustained on the basis of reputation alone” (31). In other words, the government is going to attempt to replace the vague, long-term discipline of “reputation” with a regime of quantification and assessment of research performance. One might suggest that, far from being about sustaining a “leading status”, this is actually about ensuring that universities’ ideas of what constitutes excellence do not stray too far from the government’s definitions. There is also repeated reference to schemes similar to the inaccurate, burdensome and disastrous system of league tables for schools, such as “quality assurance” mechanisms and “robust ways of describing, measuring and recording student achievement” (48). The rhetoric of “describing, measuring and recording” could have been lifted straight from the work of Michel Foucault. There is also an aim “to increase the rigour and transparency of the method for measuring our progress” (60), a claim suggestive of a large bureaucratic apparatus of control and measurement. In relation to drop-out rates among “non-traditional” students (for instance, those from working-class backgrounds), the government’s solution is not to increase grants but to set up a Regulator who can “fine those institutions that persistently fail to reach their benchmarks” (75). So when, for instance, a university takes seriously the government’s demand for equal access, and when the students start to drop out of courses because of the government’s failure to provide proper grants, the institution will be blamed and punished with fines (thereby removing money which could otherwise be given to the students in question). Perhaps this will lead to universities which are managed as “brilliantly” as the railways, where such measures are already in place. Another sinister proposal is the offer of government “help” to manage universities (78), “help” which could all too easily mean the extension into higher education of the sophisticated image-manipulating and dissent-containing tactics widely used by private sector bosses. Finally, there is to be “accredited training” for teaching staff (46), turning staff from being a self-regulating and peer-controlled group to being certified employees similar to school teachers. The training will, no doubt, encourage the outlook the government prefers.

The methods the government proposes to use are not those compatible with treating others as “partners” in a dialogue, such as rational persuasion. Rather, they are methods for treating people as objects to be manipulated by the subject (the government) in the pursuit of a project of the subject’s own definition. Hence, one sees reliance on bureaucracy and watchdogs, “incentivising” the government’s preferred courses (Newspeak for cutting off funding so that

training and lifestyle surveillance which are now a part of the benefit system. EMA’s therefore represent a step backwards for the freedom and welfare of disadvantaged F.E. students when put in a broader context.

the options the government does not prefer stagnate or dry up)⁶, directing funding so as to produce desired outcomes and using “performance” indicators to discipline activity. It is, therefore, a package of capitalist and carceral measures, making resources conditional on conformity to the agenda of a government which remains (or which assigns “employers” the position) at the panoptical centre, pulling the strings. “Government... has to retain a role because it is the only body which can balance competing interests between the different stakeholders... [and] intervene... when access, quality or standards are at risk” (21). From this imagined Archimedean point, the government operates, not to enable autonomy, but to control and constrain. Yet how can it “balance” effectively when its own conception is so unbalanced towards the “needs of business”?

In this package and through its methods, academics and students lose all agency. Instead of appealing to people to support its on the basis of its merits, the government tries to manipulate people by economic and bureaucratic means, hoping that the wanted change in “culture” will then follow from this. Such an approach is an insult to the intelligence of those the government terms “partners”. For instance, the government wishes to “send an important signal about the importance of teaching” through administrative and funding reforms (55). But if one wishes to “send a signal” to another human being, viewed as a “partner”, one does it by persuading them, not by threatening them with administrative sanctions⁷. People are not robots to be controlled from outside by “signals”, and we should not be treated as such. Any “dialogue” which starts from such assumptions is in fact not a dialogue but a mechanism of control. In effect, this pseudo-dialogue is a cover for de facto coercion. It appears that, as often as not, people will be forced into those options the government prefers, or else out of the sector altogether. Far from being “enabled” to choose two-year over three-year degrees, students will be charged more money and given less if they choose the latter. Far from being “allowed” to choose their evolution, departments will be denied funding for research unless they fall into the small numerical quota allowed this. Far from being trusted to take teaching

⁶ Our computer’s spell-check function says that there is no such word as “incentivise”. On the other hand, it recognises “economic coercion”, “manipulation” and “cutting off funding”. Perhaps the government had better have a little word with its friends at Microsoft to make sure that its mauling of the English language is not ruined by annoying little things like dictionaries.

⁷ There is a very sinister subtext to this entire discussion, as regards the implicit attitude of the government towards other people outside its own ranks. Despite the rhetoric about “partnership”, the government seems incapable of recognising anyone’s voice but its own. The government assumes both that it is capable to modify people’s “culture” from the outside, by administrative and economic means, and that it has every right to do so. This assumption is not unique to the higher education sector, but also encompasses issues as diverse as “anti-social behaviour”, the distribution of benefits, the management of schools and relations with public sector unions. The result is an agenda of control and coordination of everyday life from above, and a process of reining back individual and institutional freedoms across society. A similar example from within the White Paper is the idea that forcing (“asking”) students to “contribute” to fees is one of “a range of measures to build the giving culture” (81). Such a system of enforced negative reciprocity is anything but a “giving culture”. Indeed, as an imposed system of expectations, it is not really a “culture” at all.

seriously, staff are to be prodded and goaded through differentiated funding and systems of control. Only in the most Orwellian world could this appear to anyone as “freedom”. Far from a “freer future”, this is a future of increased regulation and economic coercion. It is a future in which the autonomy of the higher education sector from the demands of self-interested capitalists is severely threatened. It is also a recipe for a disaster similar to that which has befallen the rest of the public sector, where the need to provide a genuinely public service progressively disappears under the need to co-ordinate society in the “best” interests of business.

Crisis? What crisis?

Like all “revolutions”, the (passive counter-)revolution in higher education was launched on the back of a “crisis”. Crises precipitate and make necessary “urgent” action, “serious” measures, “wholesale transformation”, and this one is no different. Of course crisis is a two-headed beast as far as the public sector is concerned. Leaders of unions and public sector institutions need to provoke a sense of crisis in order to make government “do” something about its “chronic” under-funding, “lack of facilities”, “recruitment and retention problems” etc. But usually such noises go unheeded. The previous Tory administrations were masters of defusing or ignoring crises. They looked the other way, or promised funding in exchange for “productivity gains”, “increased flexibility”, and the like. But we are learning that with New Labour this is, if anything, a much more dangerous game to play, for talk of “crisis” inevitably leads to talk of the necessity for “modernisation”, “diversification” and “greater sensitivity to the needs of all users”. In New Labour rhetoric, there is always a “crisis” in almost every field, and therefore, always a need to “do something”, to “act” and to “take the tough decisions”. “Crisis” therefore sets in motion a disturbingly standardised machine of institutional normalisation, acting as the Trojan horse for turning each sector into another colony of the New Labour “project”. So whilst the AUT and Vice-Chancellors continued to play out the usual ritual of “crisis-speak”, neither showed very much faith until recently that their pleas would be heard. They never were before; why they should they be so now? This is after all Year Seven of New Labour. Surely they would have acted by now if they really thought there was a “crisis”? But then of course the fatal gaze fell on higher education, New Labour cogs whirred audibly into action, “consultations” were held and by the middle of 2002 a “White Paper” began to heave into view. When it eventually emerged, the news was much better, but also much worse than both recipients anticipated, a “curate’s egg” as many an anodyne comment put it. Yes, there would be “extra” money, lots of it; but yes there would also have to be changes, lots of them. Why? Because of the “crisis” in higher education.

Any hope that the egg would hatch into a phoenix is, however, misplaced, since this egg came from the same monster that laid so many others in the New Labour “project”. The rhetoric of a need to “do something” has been employed with regard to everything from the war in Iraq to cuts in single parents’ benefits. It reflects a single-minded goal to reduce the whole of the public sector to a role of service to “globalised” capitalism, or at least its metaphorical equivalent. The idea of crisis is invoked to construct a simplified rhetoric which evades the need for complex discussion. The world is simplistically divided into two possible options: “doing something”, which means doing what the government wants, or “doing nothing”, which is unacceptable since there is a “crisis”. In Charles Clarke’s foreword to the White Paper, one finds “reform” simplistically counterposed to the alternative, to “bask in previous

successes” and “shirk” the necessary reforms. “This White Paper declares our intention to take the tough decisions” (2-3). “[T]here is no room for complacency”, says the Paper itself; “We face hard choices” (4). “We cannot shirk the challenge of these critical issues. Higher education is too important” (21). “There is no easy, painless way to put our universities and student finance system on a sustainable basis. If we duck the difficult decisions needed, the risk of decline will increase” (5). The sector is “undoubtedly... at serious risk of decline. Decisions must be taken now to maintain the excellence of the sector as a whole” (13). The macho cult of decisiveness, driven not by right but by necessity, runs through the government’s rhetoric and gives it a repressive urgency which serves to silence criticisms before they can emerge.

The government is also committed to “decisive action to improve access to higher education” (18), since its “commitment to fair access will not waver”. “We must do everything that can be done to make sure that everyone who has the potential to benefit from a university education has the opportunity to do so” (18). But, it seems, there is decisiveness and then there is decisiveness. All actions are decisive, but some are more decisive than others (or, perhaps, there is decisive action and there is talking tough). In this case, the “decisive” action stops short of the funding arrangements necessary to open up universities to the poor and disadvantaged; it appears to be a way of allaying the most obvious concerns a reader is likely to feel. There are, after all, severe limits to the “everything” the government is prepared to do: it is already limited in advance by the reified assumption that it must occur in the context of a neo-liberal agenda. A funding regime including increased fees and the continuation of graduate debt is hardly a case of doing “everything” one could do to reduce exclusion. In the other cases, the “decisiveness” is so great that it could do decisive damage to higher education.

Through rhetoric of this kind, the Blairites can divide the world into two camps: the government and its eternal enemy, the “forces of conservatism”. The latter, it is implied, are complacent and are cowards, unprepared to face up to reality and take “hard choices”. This is a classic propaganda manoeuvre similar to those used by all the worst regimes, and reminiscent of the irrationalist decisionism of far-right authors such as Carl Schmitt. The world is a complex place; it cannot be divided simplistically into “doing nothing” and engaging in a single, narrowly-defined “project”. Just because one does not support the government’s agenda does not mean that one is therefore a “shirker”. This implication is a bare-faced attempt to silence criticism by attaching it in advance to a fantasmatic image of one’s adversary. Indeed, reform may well be necessary, but not *this* reform, and not in this direction. Supposing for the moment that change cannot be “easy” or “painless” (which the government asserts with no backing), there are nevertheless great differences in terms of who bears the “costs”. There is a great difference between the “pain” of a student scared out of

university by the threat of debt, and the “pain” of a capitalist dissatisfied that taxes or “skill shortages” have slightly reduced his/her bloated pay-packet. Worse, the changes the government proposes may well be a worse option than changing nothing at all. People’s desire for change, let alone a macho cult of taking “tough decisions” for their own sake, should not allow itself to be conned into supporting a devil still worse than the one we know.

It is interesting to contemplate in the abstract what a crisis in higher education might actually be like. Not enough books? Not enough staff? Not enough students? These are of course all relative measures, relative to what the system is used to receiving in the past. But The Past is another country as far as New Labour is concerned. Their “crisis” is not one of relative or absolute falls in the “unit of resource”, though this is of course wheeled out to back key claims in the Paper. New Labour was itself responsible for the unit of resource falling over the past six years and during that time showed little recognition of the need for drastic action. Nor is it directly expressed as a problem with the present, since the document repeatedly affirms that Britain has a higher education system to be proud of. No, the New Labour definition of “crisis” is instead the one familiar in the rhetoric of neoliberal transformations, that of “global competitiveness”. Higher education, so we read, is now a “global business”: there is a “global market place” for students and the “best” staff, who can now presumably hop on the plane or *Eurostar* to take their services elsewhere. But much more than this: higher education is in the vanguard of the “knowledge economy”, and, as every policy wonk knows from his or her personally signed copy of Charles Leadbeater’s “visionary” *Living on Thin Air* (preface by Tony Blair), the knowledge economy is now the key to Britain’s future success as part of the “global economy”. Without a “vibrant” higher education system we will lack the “skills”, “spin-offs”, “incubators” that “we” need in order to succeed and prosper. This would mean a decline in the *relative* position of British companies and universities, and such a relative decline is intolerable if “we” are to keep up with the Joneses (or rather, the Chiracs, Schroeders and Bushes). As the paper intones in Leadbeater-ese: “In a fast changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, in stimulating innovation and supporting higher productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central. The benefits of an excellent higher education system are far-reaching; the risk of decline is one we cannot accept”. (10) The “crisis” concerns nothing less than the future well-being, indeed survival of the nation. All of this sounds intoxicating, which is precisely the point. How could anyone object to the findings of the White Paper when *there is so much at stake*? Indeed what kind of person is it who *would* find fault with it? Why, those who don’t care for, are indifferent towards, the “well-being” and “prosperity” of the country (the “forces of conservatism” mentioned above). In a different context such people would have been “wreckers” and “saboteurs”. In New Labour argot, they are merely those who “stand in the way of Britain competing”. But more than this, we are constantly reminded of the urgency of the need for “action”, after all “our

competitors see – as we should – that the developing knowledge economy means the need for more and better trained people in the workforce” (13). Our “competitors” are ahead of us, and therefore we need to “act decisively”. Stand back for the “revolution in higher education” – for which read the “revolution from above”.

What is unclear is why there should be such a need to “act” when surely the whole idea of neo-liberal ideology is that the “hidden hand” will deliver everything. The fact that the government feels the need to “incentivise” its preferred options - to use the interventionist measures neo-liberalism was supposed to render obsolete - shows that this is not in fact a natural/rational response to external forces, but an impositional attempt to reconstruct the social world in line with a preconceived model.

Beneath this attempt is a narrative which can only be conceptualised as a fiction of the worst kind. Firstly, this involves a displaced agent: “the world is already changing” (2), and this “change” is something the government is compelled to accept in order to “master” it. This is a distorted way of saying that the demands of global capitalists for a system of the kind they prefer are above criticism. The image that one must accept and “master” change is a way of saying that one should submit uncritically to the will of whoever is driving the change. As a result, a particular political agenda as misrepresented in a temporal way - for instance, as “pay modernisation” (7). Secondly, the present is mistaken for a future which is only imagined or asserted to be occurring. For instance, the threat to Britain’s international standing is belied by claims that this standing is at present exceptional (90). This future is, however, the main focus of government concern, and the government’s neo-liberal idea is projected into the future as an unavoidable “fact”. “Higher education is becoming a global business” (13). Disputes between agents are displaced into a mythical confrontation between present/future and past, with the government on the side of the former. Yet surely the central issue is, rather, what *kind* of future people should strive for. The government’s way of posing the question treats the “future” as already a colony of the neo-liberals, yet the triumph of the neo-liberal project is a political outcome which is still being contested and resisted. “Another world is possible”. If the future is becoming what Blair says it is becoming, this is a consequence of the fact that people like Blair, imagining it to be this way, act in such a way as to bring it about.

Part of this image is the metaphorical presentation of universities as a field of “competition”. Instead of academics working across international boundaries to improve knowledge and wellbeing, one finds issues of relative standing raised into issues of principle. This is based on a narrative where Britain is doomed to decline in the face of competitors’ improvements unless the government does what it proposes. In this way, universities as “global businesses” are assumed to relate to each other in the same way corporations do. Hence, they declare:

“there is growing competition from other countries. Looking at Nobel prizes, or at citation rates for scientists, indicates that although our position is still strong it is declining” (13). “Universities need to compete in the world market” (80), and British universities can “compete with the best in the world” (14). “[C]ompetition is fierce. The USA, Japan, Canada, and other nations are significantly increasing their investment in research” (23). It is, of course, of significance whether British universities are as “good” as they were in the past, and whether they are getting “better” or “worse” (provided that one has some clear idea of what makes a university “good”). But is it really of much importance if Britain’s relative position vis-à-vis the French, Germans, Americans or Chinese is getting “worse”? This may not mean that the British system is “worse” than it was - still less that it is inadequate - so much as that the international benefits of knowledge and technique are being distributed more equitably. Knowledge is not a finite resource in the sense that, say, oil is; more knowledge in one place does not necessarily mean less somewhere else. On the other hand, the measures the government uses, concentrating on relative positions in comparative tables and distribution of Nobel Prizes, are based on finite characteristics (e.g. more British Nobel Prize winners would have to mean fewer winners from elsewhere). British research may be as good as ever, or even improving, yet still “decline” in such relative terms. This encourages a competitive ethos which is harmful to research. It is a waste of time, for instance, to have lots of scientists (and other researchers) in different institutions “competing” to be the “best” at, say, curing diseases. It is surely better if they work together (though increasingly unlikely, thanks to interference by pharmaceutical companies and the government’s new “bioterror” guidelines). Why does it matter, for instance, how Britain ranks on a table of world citations of scientific publications (11)? Surely the important issue for British universities is the quality of research, not whether this puts us “ahead” or “behind” other countries? To illustrate, imagine a situation where some disaster suddenly befell a rival such as America, so that all research there stopped. Would this have a good or a bad effect on research in Britain? Surely it would have a bad effect, since the advancements made by American scientists would be absent, and this would impede research elsewhere also. Yet by the government’s standards, such a disaster would be a great boon: Britain’s relative position would massively improve. This absurdity is the consequence of viewing what should be an activity for mutual good as an exercise in competition⁸.

⁸ There is, of course, competition between companies, and this may be affected by the actions of universities. If such competition is extended into the university system, however, it is harmful to universities as well as to the “users” of their knowledge. It should also be noted that there is no reason to assume, either that “competitive” British companies will help the British population in general, or to assume that “competitive” universities will be of particular use to either British companies or the population. “Competitive” universities could easily produce research and workers which/who are exploited by non-British companies, especially if the world really is as “globalised” as Blair thinks. People who are willing to travel to Britain to learn business expertise are probably just as willing to travel elsewhere in order to apply it. Similarly, research in, say, India could easily be exploited by British companies.

There is also something rather greedy about trying to hoard knowledge in this way. Is it really such a bad thing if, say, the Indian higher education system is getting better? Putting aside for the moment any problems about how beneficial such institutions are, could such an improvement not be viewed as a step towards rectifying the obscene inequalities which blight the contemporary world? Maybe it would even bring into international scholarship a stratum of talented people who are failed by the present structure of global institutions. Perhaps it would enrich the cultural autonomy of societies devastated by colonialism and multinational corporations. Why, then, view this as a threat? If Britain has a global advantage due to the history of colonial violence and plunder, this is an advantage of which British people should feel ashamed, not one which should be perpetuated into the future.

The use of comparative material in the White Paper is very weak. Firstly, the comparison is only with a limited number of “competitors”. The comparison is with five countries: America, Germany, Holland, China and India (13-14). Japan is fourth in the scientific publications table and France is fifth (and probably the world leader in cultural studies and theory), yet no comparison is made with these systems except as regards their higher levels of per capita funding compared to Britain. On the other hand, China and India are hardly comparable to Britain. Both are relatively poor countries with a small HE sector and massive populations, so it is no surprise that they tend to concentrate resources in a few “centres of excellence”. In the cases where comparisons are made, the document only shows (or rather, asserts) that changes similar to those proposed in Britain are being made in these countries. It also does not show that this is improving those systems. It is simply assumed that “comparisons” show that “we should be thinking hard about funding our research in larger, more concentrated units” (28). Because these other systems are doing it, “we need to look again” at the British system (14). Therefore, following this trend could as easily be following the lemmings off the cliff as following Moses to the Promised Land. Moving outside the sciences (which have some kind of privileged position in the government’s model, probably because of their direct usefulness to corporations)⁹, it is hard to see how comparisons can be done at all. History, philosophy, religion, literature, music, drama, and even such vocational mainstays as agriculture and law refer to traditions and bodies of knowledge which are not globally homogeneous. It is hardly likely that American universities will start providing the “best” preparation for entry into the English legal profession, or that India will suddenly

⁹ Readers may notice that the government does not discuss in any detail what they intend for the “best” researchers to be studying. On the one occasion where they do, the area they mention is nanotechnology (25). This is one of a number of areas of biotechnology where extreme caution is needed, since nanobots with special abilities could wreak havoc if they got out of control. It is likely, furthermore, that the list of “emerging technologies” includes such controversial concerns as cloning and genetic modification. In 1999, a Arpad Pusztai was allegedly forced to “retire” because he released information on experiments revealing possible dangers of G.M. One may wonder whether the agenda is being driven by concern for human welfare or by the profits of biotech corporations.

become the world specialist in scholarship on the economic history of nineteenth-century Britain.

The image of “competition” between universities is partly due to the image of a global market for students. It is implied (though never stated directly) that the “market” for students is internationally competitive, so that if a few British universities are the best of the best, they will attract the world’s best students. The implication is that British students are suddenly going to decamp en masse to Germany or Canada unless the British system improves. On the other hand, if the system moves the way the government wants, talented foreign students will flock to our shores. It is not clear that the government really wants such an internationalisation of higher education; imagine, for instance, its attitude if thousands of Afghans or Iraqis were to settle in Britain as university students¹⁰. In any case, the image is false. The government’s own figures show the opposite trend: “In 2000/01 21 per cent of students studied from home, compared to 15 per cent in 1994-95” (12). In other words, not only is the system not internationalising, but “competition” for students *within Britain* is increasingly reduced. In a context where more students are studying from home, it hardly seems apt to concentrate on “world class” competitiveness. It is far more important to concentrate on raising the general level of universities, so more of these immobile students have access to a “world-class” education. If universities are forced to become specialist “Centres of Excellence”, while students increasingly study from home, the net result is less, not more, opportunity.

This fictional narrative is backed by a string of claims about the world that are little more than assertions. If one is to take seriously the government’s commitment to research and scholarship, perhaps it should first demonstrate more concern for it when it reaches its own conclusions. Hence, one finds it simply asserted that the government’s proposals will improve teaching, benefit individuals and “boost world class excellence” (5). “These proposals show how [our] ambitions can be achieved” (9). Also, on a list of key points as to what the government intends to introduce (such as “Quality incentives for teaching” and “Implementation of the revised RAE”), one finds the assertion: “Access firmly secured for all”. Whereas the other items on the list are operational changes, this is an asserted outcome, simply assumed to emerge from thin air. One also finds it asserted that organising the AHRB on lines closer to those used in the sciences will lead to “reduced bureaucracy” (32), clearly a counterintuitive claim yet made with no backing whatsoever. Such claims are not

¹⁰ The government pledges to attract 50,000 students to the U.K. from outside Europe by 2005 (65). This is roughly the same as the number of “bogus” refugees they intend to deport each year. The principle seems to be to get rid of the foreigners who want to be here, and entice the ones who don’t. The government’s commitment to breaking down borders is decidedly selective, and it is likely that any proposal to increase overseas students will be arranged so that it clearly benefits the west rather than the Third World. In any case, 50,000 is not a substantial enough number to justify claims that the British system is part of a global market.

underpinned by any evidence; it is simply assumed that intent will yield effect. One then finds that “[s]tandards have risen dramatically in primary schools” (68), a claim that disguises the damage wrought to the sector by managerialism and bureaucratisation. Between staff shortages, demoralisation, reduced social status due to repeated vilification of “failing teachers”, increased paper-work and stress, the anti-educational effects of perpetual testing, an exodus of older staff out of the teaching profession, and knock-on effects in terms of discontented and therefore “disruptive” students, government reforms have succeeded only in undermining the comprehensive education system. (The “improved standards” are presumably the improved results in formal measurements such as SAT tests and Ofsted inspections, which are artificial because schools use indicator-focused tactics such as training for tests. It is much the same as the situation in Maoist China, when a visiting official would find bountiful fields even in times of famine). They also claim, with no backing, that the results of the Dearing inquiry were “established” and are “now generally accepted” (82). For our part, we have always opposed pay-to-learn, as do many others (a firm majority in some opinion polls). The government tries to impose its view in the face of criticism by presenting it as a fact, when actually all they are doing is silencing their opponents through their use of language. Of all these mistakes, the most worrying is the failure to account for the assumption that the proposed measures will succeed in achieving government goals (other than neo-liberal control). Perhaps the proposals show how the government intends to achieve its goals, but it does not show that the improvements will in fact occur. In this way, the crucial case which the White Paper should be making - the case for *why* one should support the government’s agenda - is peremptorily assumed to have been already made. This suggests that, far from being central to the government’s agenda, serious research and scholarship is a threat to the dogmas which sustain their position.

This dogmatism also arises whenever the government deals with issues of ethics. They simply assert that “we think that it is right” for various of their proposals to be brought in (20), as if ethics needed no further justification than mere conviction. They also assert that it is “reasonable” to expect students to pay to learn (2), and that it is “right” to reward outstanding teaching through differentiated pay (52-3). Even assuming such a claim can be established, claims that a proposal is fair assume also that the conditions of “background justice” are fair. Yet the government does not demonstrate this to be the case. There is not a reason why these things are “right”; according to New Labour, they simply are. Such ethical claims may appeal to emptily moralistic minds, but clearly they are no way of improving politics. They believe it is right and reasonable; we, and many others, believe it is wrong. The mechanisms which the government intend to use to impose their agenda are not those of ethical persuasion. Therefore, they are making ethical claims from a standpoint which renders these claims empty. Their methods are about power, not ethics. If they believe they are “right” and that this is enough to justify their views, let them resign their posts and form a

church instead of a government. Otherwise, what they are preaching is a dangerous fundamentalism.

The “global competition” narrative has as its correlate the idea that only a few universities can succeed. Only the “best universities contain a critical mass of research groups which can compete globally in a wide range of disciplines” (31). This is derived from the fact that corporate competition is inclined to whittle down the number of competitors. It ignores the differences between the corporate and university sectors. The result is an aggressive agenda of encouraging the “differentiation” the model proposes as a fact - another example of state intervention doing what the “hidden hand” is supposed to do. The government simply cannot accept that there are as many good universities in Britain as there are - so new criteria have to be introduced to differentiate them. There is also a constant emphasis on recruiting the “best” researchers (14, 33), rewarding the best teaching staff (53), “concentrating funding on the very best” research departments (21) and so on. Only a few are allowed to be the “best”, and the government wishes to “ensure the increased funding supports our most talented researchers and our most effective research institutions and departments” (24). So no-one is falling short of being “best” at something, institutions are to “focus on what they do best”, and “scarce resources are applied... to produce a focus on comparative advantage” (20). To construct the category of the “best”, the government has to intervene to construct a group of people who fit the bill, “making a clearer distinction between the strong and the strongest” (23). “It is right to focus resources on the best” (31). This is not about recognising good universities, teachers or researchers. It is, in the government’s own words, about “greater explicit differentiation” (22) and “more discrimination between the best” (30), inventing divisions between “the best” and the rest where there are few or none to be found. This even goes so far as inventing a new category of research achievement over and above the RAE criteria (simply because the RAE shows that many universities, not just a handful, are “good”). The government is also unhappy that too many students are getting good degrees. There needs to be more effort to convey the differences between students (49). In addition to this division, research is to be managed in “larger, better managed” units such as consortia. Consortia may eventually be the only bodies able to award PhD’s (23, 33). Securing the “best” is also used as an excuse for increasing pay differentials and taking money away from other departments, researchers and teachers. For instance, “those who teach well are entitled to have their success rewarded properly” through “better pay differentiation” (46, 52).

The criteria for being the “best” are never specified. After all, there is hardly a world of difference between the “best” researchers and the “good” researchers, and while it is in students’ interests to have competent teachers, the existence of an elite of superteachers is of little use to anyone. It is unclear whether there are really many teachers or researchers whose abilities are so far in excess of everyone else’s as to render “the best” a meaningful category

(given that it is artificially restricted in terms of numbers). In any case, “the best” do not achieve so much more than everyone else to justify the extra funding the government promises. In many important areas of research, breakthroughs are probably more likely to come from a large number of good projects than from a small number of “best” projects. The emphasis on the “best” is reducing choice and opportunities for everyone, by ensuring that what opportunities do exist are few in number and concentrated in specific places. The 20-plus percent of students who study from home are likely to find their choices diminished. Research is likely to be especially hard-hit, while the emphasis on the “best” staff will lead to attacks on other academics’ salaries. The emphasis is also likely to be harmful on the level of outcomes. Is it really the case, for instance, that six “very best”-class medical researchers on twice the regular pay are more likely to find a cure for something than twelve ordinary researchers who are only “good”?¹¹ In any case, it is unclear why researchers and teachers need “incentives” in order to become the “best”, or why it matters if the “best” research is carried out in Britain or abroad. The emphasis only on the “strongest” is an uncalled-for differentiation based on an ideological assumption. There is little evidence that this group, so little different from the other “good” universities and researchers, really do give the “best returns”, at least by a wide enough margin to justify treating them as a separate category. Pay differentiation, for instance, is not about what the “best” “deserve”, but about a divide-and-rule strategy which uses income inequality and bureaucratic measures to manipulate staff into doing what the government wants, instead of what they think is best for students or best advances knowledge. If present indicators fail to indicate an elite of “the best”, perhaps this is because there is no such elite. That so many universities score highly in the RAE and that so many students get good degrees is something of which the government should be proud, not something which should threaten their sense that there must never be too much room at the top. Similarly, “better” pay differentiation for teachers may not actually reflect differences in ability; it may in fact penalise some whose teaching is almost as good as that of the “best”.

Transferring research to larger units could be harmful in a variety of ways. Firstly, it would leave researchers overly dependent on the few institutions which offer places. This would harm innovation and originality. Imagine the situation if a dominant paradigm were to take hold of several major consortia and refuse to give places except to its own adherents. Secondly, the funding given to these places is still likely to occur in the context of a reduction

¹¹ Supposing that one can somehow measure the importance of research, let us take an imaginary discipline with a structure similar to that operative in H.E. today. One might find, say, that twelve universities are doing research of 5 points value, eight others are doing research of 3 points value and ten others are doing research of 1 points value. Suppose that the government proposals were then introduced. The bottom two groups would no longer engage in research, only (say) five of the top group would become Centres of Excellence, and five others in the top group would continue doing research to a lesser degree (say, 3 points value). To compensate for the

of the number of places available overall. This means that important research will not get done, and that talented researchers will be forced out of higher education. There are similar dangers involved in an approach which appears not only to recognise but to prefer collaborative research (28). The planned “consortia” are likely to be well above human-scale, and could easily turn into restrictive control apparatuses. “Business’s” gain will be higher education’s loss.

One disturbing aspect of this rhetoric is the implication that the “strong” should be given more money to make them even “stronger”, while the “weak” should be “allowed” to wither and die by being starved of resources. This is a Victorian ethic of “survival of the fittest”, not the brave new ethos for the twenty-first century which the government would like us to believe it is.

Student “investor”

After many months of huffing and puffing the White Paper finally arrived in January 2003 to met by a storm of indignation and concern in the full range of the UK press. Concern centred, naturally, on the Paper’s heavily flagged “key” recommendation: the “freedom” granted to universities (HEIs) to charge up to £3000 for tuition to be paid back on graduation and only once earnings reach £15,000 a year. This had it seems been the key source of debate in he run up to the publication of the paper and seemed in itself to encapsulate the various ideological positions within the leadership of the Party. The “Brownites” were heavily in favour a “graduate tax” to be paid over the course of a graduate’s career, thereby recognising the “premium” that the award of a degree gave the graduate in terms of salary and career prospects (widely and wholly misleadingly touted as £400,000 in a working lifetime). As the cannier commentator noted, it also guaranteed that the extra money going to HEIs would be controlled by the Treasury thus permitting the “political” control of expenditure so beloved of the Brown chancellorship. Therefore, one ends up with the situation where students themselves are paying to study substandard degrees, in the interests of business and the government.

As regards the alleged benefits from university education, one can hardly find a clearer case of “lies, damned lies and statistics”. The government is taking what is only an average figure, and turning it into a universal benefit. Hence, they write of students in terms of the “benefits they get from higher education”, which they should “pay for” (76), and of “the financial benefits which generally follow” from higher education (84). Yet these “benefits” are decidedly unequal in distribution. Indeed, the financial benefits of having a degree are at least

48 lost points of value, the top five would have to double the value of their own research. This is, of course, an

in part a statistical fraud. Any social researcher or statistician could have told the government that correlation is not causation. A simple correlation between being a graduate and having higher earnings tells one very little. It is still the case, as the White Paper notes, students come disproportionately from higher income backgrounds. “Those from the top three social classes are almost three times as likely to enter higher education as those from the bottom three” (17). Notwithstanding the government’s pledges to the contrary, the introduction of top-up fees is guaranteed to worsen this situation. It is also the case that, statistically, social mobility is very low in Britain. In other words, people from high-income backgrounds tend to get well-paid jobs. Poor people go on to poorly paying jobs. This means that having a degree tends to correlate with having a higher income, but this might simply be a result of both these outcomes being related to a prior cause, i.e. social class. Studies that have controlled for the impact of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender have found that having a degree leads to little if any greater income. Meanwhile, some vulnerable groups are at substantial risk of unemployment and low income after graduating. Students with disabilities have a one-in-two chance of being unemployed; income of black graduates is two-thirds lower than income of white graduates, and women graduates’ income is only 90% of their male counterparts” (NUS statistics). Nursing is now a graduate profession, yet nurses are paid abysmally low wages. Financial benefits do not “generally” follow at all; they follow only for some students, only in some cases. For all the rhetoric about access, the government’s proposals tend to *insist* that graduates “benefit” as a *condition* for going to university (and also that they not be risk-averse). It therefore tends to drive out those students in relation to whom such expectations are inappropriate, or whose motive for studying is non-economic¹².

What was noticeable in the debate both in the run-up to the publication of the paper and the immediate aftermath was this assumption that any increase in expenditure in HE should somehow be paid by those who were set to “benefit” from it, namely the students/graduates themselves. This reflects a petty-minded, penny-pinching attitude to government expenditure which has the effect of leaving all the important issues up to private capitalists. One plaintive

artificial indication, since research cannot really be ranked in this way.

¹² The government also says that one must only repay when one earns a certain amount, and that this amount is to be raised (87). Even assuming that this government, and any Tory successors, can be trusted not to retrospectively apply harsher regimes of repayment, this still leaves unanswered questions. What if a graduate is *never* in a position to repay? What if student debt interferes with the ability to obtain other loans, such as mortgages, thereby pushing graduates into perpetual poverty? What if government proposals “de-incentivise” people from working the overtime, or accepting the promotions, which would take their income from just below to just over the target figure? In any case, it is clear that the burden of debt will always weigh heaviest on those who can least afford it. The rich will most probably pay their children’s fees up front, while the poor will be saddled with a burden to keep them in poverty. In addition, one has reason to fear the spread of indentured labour schemes where companies or government departments agree to pay fees, or pay off loans, in return for guarantees of service. People will then be tied into a job for years after graduation. Something of this kind is already operating in relation to teacher training, as is discussed later (89). Incidentally, it seems absurd that fees are introduced and then paid by other government departments: if fees are to be paid with government money, they might as well be abolished and replaced by direct government funding.

letter in *The Guardian* asked simply “What about paying for universities out of general taxation?” The letter as well as the sentiment underpinning it was noticeable for its almost otherworldly quality, a rude reminder of some by-gone age when people uttered antique prognostications concerning the “common good”, “public service” or some such. Many also remarked on the seeming gap between the sentiment underpinning the policy of “access” and “widening participation” and the demand that students carry the burden for paying for their own studies, albeit after graduation. Thus “access” and “participation” would increase despite the drastic increase in the “price” paid for higher education, an utterly counter-intuitive proposition even for non-economists. How could the circle be squared?

One of the key propositions of the paper is that what it is that people are “accessing” or “participating” in would itself undergo substantial change. A degree could no longer be thought of as in a sense a period of study before work, a separate, protected space from the rigours and stresses of the workplace. It is to be overcoded in capitalist terms, both literally and metaphorically. The White Paper sees a degree as an “investment”, or even more reductively as a “training” for work, and thus as part of a continuum leading individuals from school to “employment”.¹³ (Even what the Paper calls “education” is in large part vocational training, elevated to the status of something equivalent to a full degree). An investment is of course a very different thing to an education. Investments are made by private individuals who seek private gain in the form of future remuneration. An education on the other hand is something that people have a “right” to. Worse, it is something that usually comes free as part and parcel of life in a civilised society. People have a right to free education; they do not have a right to “free” investments¹⁴. But of course this was to be investment as “debt”. How could the promise of a massive debt be regarded as “socially inclusive”? How can loading people with huge sums to repay be seen as facilitating access and participation?¹⁵

¹³ The notion of education as an “investment” is also the thrust of the Government’s recent advertising campaign urging students and their parents to consult relevant documents and web sites to make that informed decision that is in turn the trademark of the canny investor.

¹⁴ As already suggested, knowledge is not restricted in its use, so its commodification requires more than the usual interpretative violence. If X knows something and teaches it to Y, this does not at all affect X’s continued “possession” of the knowledge, and this makes it unlike money and unlike (for instance) bread, wood and television sets. To become a saleable commodity, therefore, knowledge must be artificially restricted through the construction of hurdles and barriers to its dissemination. This is the role of measures such as tuition fees and the denial of maintenance grants. It is to be remembered that, unless they are to starve, the people who would otherwise be students must be receiving some amount of money somewhere else. One might inquire whether the alternative positions they may be occupying are really worth the costs imposed by not giving them grants. For instance, one may find them joining the growing ranks of “job seekers”, or doing badly paid and often unnecessary jobs.

¹⁵ Debt culture is not evenly distributed among all groups. Richard Hogwarts classic study “The Uses of Literacy” reveals that, traditionally, the working class were quite hostile to debt, seeing it as a way that “They”, the bosses and the powerful, could exert control. Someone who is in debt would be thereby in chains to a powerful person, and this would impede their capacity to take action in the future. It is perhaps worrying that this assumption has declined over time.

What few remarked on is the degree to which assumptions about debt and the debt culture are implicit to the neoliberal account of “citizenship” or more generally. Debt in this sense is not merely a by-product of life in a consumer society, it is intrinsic to it. As Mrs Thatcher saw clearly, a nation of “homeowners” is an advance on a “nation of shopkeepers”. There are only so many who can own shops, but everyone potentially can own their own “home”. The reality of “home ownership” in contemporary Britain is “mortgage debt”, which in turn means the necessity for work, for compliance with the terms of repayment, with the necessity for acting out the role of “good employee” for fear of losing the means of its repayment. Feudal servitude gives way to mortgaged servitude, and in between the “masterless man” so feared by “decent” society at the end of the feudal period becomes “mortgaged man”, tamed by his own “stake” in the social weal.

For the contemporary analogue of “masterless man” read “feckless student”, propped up by “generous grants” and subsidies to undertake “Micky Mouse” degrees, oblivious to the necessity to acquire “key skills” and “employability”. The revolution in student finance is designed to address the feckless and capricious nature of the student market place. The abolition of grants for all but the poorest (to be set at the outlandishly low level of £1,000) together with a hike in tuition fees creates a market of people who are seeking “to invest” in their education much as we currently invest in our houses. “Investors” are of course a very different kind of creature to “students” as that term has been understood. Gone the carefree arbitrariness that has long been the hallmark of student choice both of institution and course (“I chose Swansea Uni because its near the sea”; “but I like media studies”). With an investment to make and heavy debts to repay minds are to concentrate on what is important for personal economic advancement. The idea that university represents a space for thought and reflection, a haven from the utilitarian considerations of the *Oikos* - an idea that underpinned the conception of the university from Plato, through Cardinal Newman to Oakeshott – give way to dismally instrumental considerations of “skills acquisition”, “transferability”, “employability”. The university is no longer a “space” outside instrumentality, it is a machine for the creation of the next generation of “entrepreneurs” and “innovators”. This is a form of impositional subjectification which reduces students’ options in the formation of their own identity.¹⁶

¹⁶ The student “investors” will be bad news for their own education and for staff also, since they may well see it as their right to be handed a degree as a packaged commodity. They have, after all, paid for it. Students who are “contributing” financially may be less inclined to “contribute” effort also. The idea of “seamless progression routes for students” (21) conjures up a disturbing image of students who think they can “seamlessly” get a degree without either talent or effort. Similarly, the image of students as “intelligent customers” requiring “accessible information” (47) suggests the imposition of a stultifying seriousness. Students will be under pressure to make “responsible” decisions, so that the information produces its own demand. Further, students who feel “failed” by their university would be more likely to become litigious if they felt themselves to be cheated “investors”. In general, the “investor” model leads to a system of vulnerability that harms both staff and students.

With this transition from education to training, and from enlightenment to “investment” comes of course all the other aspects of commodification; the necessity for the development of increased “customer focus”, “robust information” (47) guiding the consumer who will be equipped with “the right to good teaching” backed by an elaborate infrastructure of appeal courts, and quasi-judicial remedies for those unsatisfied by the end “product” (49). Students are to be “intelligent customers” choosing on the basis of this information based on criteria such as the quality of teaching (47). “The admissions process should also be a serious one for the student - requiring commitment from them, and a real investment in the decision to enter higher education” (72). Most likely, they will be made to feel they have to adopt this position in order to be “responsible”. These measures remove the sense that education is different from commerce or industry, that the relationship between student and tutor rests, for example on trust and respect as opposed to contractual undertakings. Such antique notions, long ago swept away in the sphere of commerce, are part and parcel of the reduction of the uniqueness or difference of education as a public benefit as much as a private one. Education is now to be regarded as a private matter between a customer and his “provider”, and if the provider falls down in its “delivery” of the required “outcomes” then it should be subject to the same penalty as the provider of any other commodity. Furthermore, it is to be weighed down by a utilitarian cult of “transferable skills” that impedes creativity and the autonomous exchanges of ideas.

Research, scholarship and the uses of “innovation”

These transformations in the nature of student “requirements” is the most predictable aspect of the White Paper, and one that merely mirrors the transformation in the rest of the public sector; in health, in transport and housing all of which have already undergone the requisite change in “culture” with predictably disastrous outcomes. What is perhaps novel as regards the proposals here is the transformation to be effected through funding mechanisms forcing HEIs directly into the arms of business. This aspect of the proposals which have been least commented upon but which have the most profound ramifications for the sector.

One of the effects of the 1992 reforms effected by the last Tory administration which granted the “university” title to polytechnics and some colleges of HE was in a sense to raise the aspirations of the latter. The reforms had little effect on the “old” universities who formed themselves into groupuscles (the Russell Group; the 1994 group) to protect their interests, but were otherwise untouched by the reforms. The ex-polytechnics on the other hand were now encouraged to think of themselves as on a par with the older more prestigious institutions, to compete for available research monies through the twin track of the RAE competition and funding council grants. This produced its own stresses as many formerly teaching orientated

staff in the former polytechnics were expected to produce “research” of the requisite kind needed to “boost” the income of the institution. In fact, that benefits were more in the perception than the reality, as research monies from both private and public sources continued to be more or less monopolised by a small group of “research intensive” universities. Nonetheless it is this status quo of the powerful and relatively powerless that was the object of perhaps the most aggressively framed of the proposals in the White Paper: the acceleration of an already Darwinian struggle for research funds so as to steer the plucky post-92 “newcomers” and many of the “old” universities towards the function of *Technische Hochschule*. How does this work?

As we noted, one of the key planks of the Tory 1992 reforms was to promote an essential “similarity” of function between the former polytechnics and the universities. They would all now be required to undertake teaching and research. It was the old universities who complained, pointing to the lower unit costs of polytechnical education and arguing that this would drive down the unit cost at their own institutions. But this of course was precisely the point. Introduce the cheaper-to-run “polys” into the equation and the old universities would have to cut their cloth more carefully, to “rationalise provision” in like manner. And of course this was the effect, with a drastic reduction in unit cost so that the difference in the “student experience” of teaching as between old and new become barely distinguishable (with the exception of Oxford and Cambridge who were able to cross-subsidise their own idiosyncratic tutorial system). The White Paper seeks on the other hand to “promote”, indeed “celebrate diversity”. “Diversity” is one of those weasel words in the New Labour lexicon that in essence means “unequal”. Thus “diversity” in secondary school provision means pumping funds into “specialist” schools, so that they prosper and demonstrate New Labour’s commitment to “excellence”. That such excellence is measured against and at the cost of “non-specialist” - or “bog standard” comprehensives is the unstated yet plainly visible assumption underpinning the policy of “diversity”.

As “diversity” pans out over the paper the implication is that a relatively small proportion of HEIs (perhaps as few as four) are to concentrate on research and teaching whilst others (i.e. the vast majority) are to be “encouraged” to “play to their strengths” in teaching and servicing the needs of business. This disaggregation of teaching from research is a key plank of the document, for what follows is that teaching is not to be conceived of as the imparting of “scholarship” or the knowledge intrinsic to a discipline. This could only be the case in those settings where teaching is undertaken alongside research. Rather, as it appears in the document the primary purpose of teaching is the acquisition of “key skills” and the tools needed to increase “graduate employability”. The mechanism for this (re)bifurcation of function is through “focusing resources more effectively on the best research performers” (28). To this end a handful of HEIs, “our very best research institutions”, will be given the

resources “to compete effectively with the world’s best institutions” (23). These institutions will be “free” to maintain that connection between teaching and research that in another age would have been regarded as the basis of any kind of university education worth the name. But what of the rest, *which composes the large majority of HEIs?*

As the Paper makes plain, “diversity” means disaggregating not only between “research” and “teaching”, but also *within* research itself, and by extension within teaching itself. Thus on the basis of the formulae used in the Paper we can differentiate between at least two forms of research: that which is desirable, but not essential, and that which is essential and thus desirable. The first is “scholarship”, the second is “research”. The thrust of the White Paper is that “we need to make better progress [sic] in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation”. “We” need to support research for the sake of the “knowledge economy”, and thus for the “wider interests” of society. What we do not apparently “need” is scholarship as such, only scholarship that can turn itself into research. In the case of the arts and humanities this means servicing the needs of the heritage industries, “tourism”, etc.¹⁷ Of course with the creation of a small number of 6* departments New Labour can legitimately claim that both research and scholarship have been as it were “taken care of”.¹⁸ There is a guaranteed space for scholarship in philosophy, classics etc.; but this guarantee only extends as far as those departments to be named 6*, most of which are located in the Golden Triangle. For the rest, the White paper offers bleak reading, for in essence the argument is that those who are not included in the group of “very best research performers” do something useful for “society”. This means promoting economic growth through generating “spin out companies”, “knowledge transfer”, “innovating” and supporting the needs of “local and regional business”. Thus, “to improve institutions should increasingly be embedded in their regional economies, and closely linked with the emerging agendas of Regional Development Agencies” (36). A more Stalinist sounding formula is difficult to imagine. Note the use of the passive voice in the sentence. Universities are “to be embedded”. In this brave new world they cannot be trusted to “embed themselves” to the required degree, but rather need “to be embedded”. By whom? The paper does not say; but the implication is clear: money will flow to those who comply, and cease for those who don’t.

¹⁷ At the time of writing (May 2003) confusion surrounds a recent speech given by Charles Clarke in which he is alleged to have dismissed Medieval history as an example of the kind of activity that should not be funded. It is on the terms defined here “scholarship”, not “research”. Incredibly some of the responses elicited by newspapers from senior academics fell into Clarke’s hands in claiming that medieval history was important for maintaining the ‘tourism industry’. This of course tacitly confirms that only scholarship with an economic use should be considered worth the tax payers’ money.

¹⁸ Following the publication of the White Paper, huge confusion and not a little resentment was caused by the Government’s wish to use the results of the 2001 RAE for such purposes, leading it to identify 5** departments, not the 6* advertised in the Paper. The result, i.e. increased ‘selectivity’ was the same.

Outside the “research-intensive” elite the only justification for undertaking research is to consolidate and support the needs of “key users”. As the Paper puts it, “We wish to see these universities concentrating on acquired technology and working mainly with local companies through consultancy rather than licensing new technology”. (38) As it continues, “we see staff in these institutions acquiring a group of leading edge technologies and exploiting them by creating innovative solutions to real world problems and needs, rather than themselves making breakthroughs in science or technology” (38). Again, the arrogance underlying the analysis is eye-catching: “Dr Jones, put that test tube down will you? You might make a breakthrough if you don’t watch out ... We’ve got much more important matters to attend to, like creating innovative solutions to real world problems”. So academics need now to ask themselves not what is the value of their research, but rather what is the “exchange value” of their research? If research cannot be “spun-out”, “transferred”, used as an “incubator” or in some other exploited by “local and regional partnerships” then the clear message it is research that is not “worth” anything, and should be stopped. The desire to make “breakthroughs” is not itself a valid reason for undertaking research.¹⁹

So how does “diversity” pan out? What is evident is that the disaggregation of research is mirrored in the disaggregation of teaching. Thus on a simple deduction we can note that the Paper envisages at least three kinds of institutions emerging from the exercise. There will be those in which academics are engaged in scholarship (and/or research) and teaching. Let us call them Alpha institutions. There will be Beta institutions, in which academics are engaged in research (but not scholarship) and teaching. Finally, there will be Gamma institutions in which “academics” are engaged in teaching only. Those in Beta and Gamma institutions, which depending on how brutally the Paper is implemented by HEFCE in consultation with the government, could be all but four institutions (Oxbridge, UCL and Imperial), will be working in institutions that have in terms of the form and content of the work conducted within become arms of capital. They will be not merely be expected to “collaborate” with business, they will be required to do so in the “interests” of both. Non-elite universities are to be the “business incubators” and find their value to the extent to which they carry out this

¹⁹ The entire question of agency is treated in a dubious way throughout the White Paper. The government is happy to be the agent when they are offering something positive - for instance, “we will not compromise on quality” (7), and “we have doubled the amount of extra money to help vulnerable students” (8). On the other hand, whenever they say anything they know will be unpopular, it becomes the result of forces outside their control. For instance, “trends demand a more highly-skilled workforce” (58). A “trend” is an abstraction, and as such cannot “demand” anything. In this case, the sources of the demand - the government and capitalists - are concealed. In another case, universities are supposed to “need” financial independence “if they are to flourish” (77). It is not mentioned that this is only the case if the government refuses to fund them properly. In the only case where higher education funding is discussed in relation to other government spending, the so-called “competing” demands on spending are all from within the education sector (82). There is no mention of the blank cheque which Blair seems to write for prisons, police, stealth bombers, the “war against terrorism” and the rest of the repressive apparatus of the state. Nor is there a mention of the cuts the government has made in corporation tax.

function. A harsh future awaits those whose incubator hatches something that cannot be “exploited” by capital. Betas will of course look like universities in that there is something going on within which looks like ‘research and teaching’; but in essence they will be highly instrumentalised variants of both. Of course the degree to which academics are able to pursue “curiosity-driven” research has been in sharp decline outside the arts, but still one can imagine the social sciences for example providing the data and skills needed for “economic growth and competitiveness”. Beyond the Beta group of universities combining applied research with teaching lies the Gamma group whose “mission” is to “deliver” employees with the requisite skills demanded by our now impatient employees. The degree to which such institutions could conceivably be regarded as “universities” on most definitions is entirely questionable. They are in essence vocational colleges, and find their worth to the degree that they bare able to furnish employers with the “skills” they need to grow. This is not then so much a “rebinarisation” of HE as some commentators have suggested. Or if it is then it is a binarisation with a tiny handful to be found at one “pole” (as few as four) with the vast majority more or less at the other. In essence what is being proposed is a radical transformation of the entire sector. What most people mean currently by a “university education” will be found in a tiny corner of the HE universe. As for the rest, it will be some variant on a technical or vocationally orientated “training”.

Finally “diversity” does not only refer to the form and function of institutions but also of course to local rates of pay and conditions of service. The White Paper displays a predictable contempt for the notion that academics engaged in similar activities of similar seniority should be paid similar rates of pay. Now that they will be engaged in “diverse” activities, it is only “right” that they are remunerated in suitably “diverse” ways. In addition, the Paper plays up the rhetoric of the “global market place”, a scary place where institutions compete for the “very best”. All of this is not so much “code” for the obliteration of national pay frameworks as a blaring trumpet declaring the necessity for increasingly exorbitant rates of pay for “our best researchers”, but also the usual “flexibility” of contract and conditions of service for “bog standard” academics who find their “skills” somewhat less sought after in the “global market place”. All this is spiced up with talk of rewarding the “best teachers”, so that even those who find that “diversity” has smiled less favourably on their institutions can still be led by the nose to some distant teaching-related carrot.

The argumentation is of course an extrapolation from corporate Britain, with its fat cats at one end of the scale talking up their “remuneration packages” with reference to some notional “global market place” for their services. At other end of the scale is an increasingly proletarianised academia scratching about with “flexible rates of pay”, temporary contracts, little in the way of holiday entitlement or pension entitlements. And, as in the rest of Britain PLC, such moves will be justified by reference to the common good, to the health and well-

being of the country, to the need for Britain to compete successfully in the global arena. The reforms will be a beacon for the rest of Europe and the rest of the world to follow; and in its wake an education system once proud of its independence and autonomy is reduced to a neoliberal approximation of rationality. Leo Abse claims that Tony Blair had a hard time at university, so now he hates the whole sector. The government are not exactly going out of their way to prove Abse wrong. Why not go the whole hog and outsource the “academic” labour to the sweatshops of Indonesia and the Philippines? At least it’s warmer there than in Britain.

Neo-liberal rhetoric

Underlying these proposals is an entire rhetoric of neo-liberal reductivism, the impositional character of which is obvious from the coercive nature of the government intervention. Hence, one finds references to “investing” in universities so they can “compete” (6). Universities are supposed to view their research activities as “research businesses” (25-6), and students have a right to expect high-quality teaching only because they are “funders” of universities (49). The government also constructs itself in a capitalistic way, wanting to ensure its “investment... is used to the best effect” (13) and “make best use of the money” by ensuring it is “allocated, organised and managed effectively” (26). This penny-pinching attitude is a result of viewing oneself as “guardians of the public purse” (50), as if the greatest evil in the world is funding something inefficient. As a result, concerns about inclusion, social justice, personal autonomy, knowledge, and even such conservative concerns as preserving cultural heritage fall by the wayside. Salaries, for instance, are to be used, not to give everyone a fair income, but to engineer particular outcomes by “using salaries to the best possible effect in recruiting and retaining excellent researchers” (14). Also, “it is critical that we focus our resources on the strongest, who bring us the best returns” (30). This model is about extracting, not enabling: far from being a partnership, it is a relationship where the government is out for what it can get.

The representation of universities as metaphorical businesses occurs alongside an active project to incorporate them into the activities of corporations. The obsession with the alleged “economic” role of higher education is so widespread in this document that it is impossible to miss (taking up, for instance, the whole of sections 3 and 5). Higher education is an “asset”, valued by the government, only because of its alleged economic effects, such as “creating jobs and prosperity” and ensuring that people “earn more” (4). It is a “great national asset” because of its “contribution to the economic and social well-being of the nation” (10), “the health of our economy and of our democracy” (92) and the “strength of the national

economy” (10), and it “generates over £34 billion for our economy”²⁰ and can contribute to creating more jobs and prosperity (6)²¹. Research is valuable because it can “benefit the economy” (23). It is “in the country’s interest” to expand H.E. because “new jobs” will mainly be in areas staffed by graduates (16). Higher education “powers the economy” (10). Even widening of university access is treated less as an issue of right than an issue of economic “waste of potential” and “talent” (8, 18). This agenda also expresses itself in demands that universities be “responsive to a wide range of business needs” (21) and that non-research-intensive universities specialise in “knowledge transfer” (38). “Good higher education business links should play a part in tackling the problem of low skills that holds back our national productivity” (42), and higher education expansion is to be “of an appropriate quality and type to meet the demands of employers and the needs of the economy and students” (60). All universities are to be “committed to... the economic health of their region and the country as a whole” (92). “All employers of graduates have an interest in ensuring that there are enough new graduates with the right skills to meet their needs” (88). Here are some of the dozens of other references, expressed in the government’s own preferred style:

- * “Our economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based”, demanding “a more highly-skilled workforce” (58). “The economy also needs people with modern skills at all levels” (58).
- * “Universities need stronger links with business and economy” (4); “encourage links between higher education institutions and businesses” (37), “helping businesses to be more innovative and competitive” (12)
- * “meet rising skill needs” (4); “educates and skills the nation for a knowledge-dominated age” (10); “close the skills gap” (16); “support... skills development alongside provision of technology and knowledge” (39)
- * a discussion of the White Rose Consortium which has “been successful in realising the economic benefits of university research” by creating “spin-out companies” and establishing “licenses” and “patents” (30)
- * “build capacity in disciplines that are strategically important” (32)

²⁰ One might wonder why a sector which contributes £34 billion is supposed to feel grateful to be given £10 billion by the government. Perhaps universities should demand that capitalists give back rather more of the £34 billion they are apparently making at universities” expense.

²¹ New Labour shares the common populist dogma of viewing work as a good in itself. However, there is no necessary reason why “creating jobs” should be seen as a good thing. The fact that people want jobs when these are unavailable is a structural irrationality created by the present system of wage-labour. Most work consists of activities that people would rather not do, and it is therefore not rational to endlessly maximise the amount of work available. Human happiness would probably be greater if the government, or society, concentrated less on “creating jobs” and more on creating alternative modes of living for those who do not have them. In any case, New Labour has no commitment to using government investment to create full employment, which at present levels of technology could only be done through “make-work”. It nevertheless clings to the dogma that everyone must seek work, however irrational and Sisyphean this might be.

* encourage links ranging from technology transfer to developing “skills” employers want to fostering the growth of new companies (37). Further, “we must also make sure that businesses can access all the rest of the knowledge and expertise held by the HE sector” (37). It is not clear what the barriers are to this at present, since businesspeople can, should they wish to, find this knowledge in the mass of books and journal articles available. Perhaps one should be more worried about companies retarding the spread of knowledge by keeping pioneering research secret and by using intellectual property rights to inhibit others using knowledge.

Although asserted as if it is obvious, this “economic” role is in fact an invention by the government. “Meeting skill needs” for private “employers” has never been a central part of universities’ self-perception. It has more to do with the government’s Leadbeater-esque narrative of a growing “knowledge economy” requiring better-trained workers (e.g. 13). That courses are to be made “more work-focused”, “truly employer-focused” and “respond to employer needs” is closer to the point (16, 39, 61), since the role of government policy is to turn universities into a subsidiary of the world of “work” (i.e. the capitalist economy). The “distinctive mission” of non-research-intensive universities is to provide “knowledge transfer” for businesses, and to be funded, such universities will need to demonstrate “relationships with employers and businesses”, “strong support from employers” and “how its work fits into the RDA strategy” (39). The RDA in turn is to ensure that “supply” of education is coordinated with “demand” from employers (41). Universities are expected to adopt a “strategic” approach (42), amending courses to fit into the state’s overall plans for the economy, so as to give “the economy” what it “needs” (60).

The wider humanistic and social roles of universities vanish almost entirely. Occasionally, the White Paper mentions almost in passing that the “benefits” of higher education for “individuals” and “society” are not purely economic. For instance, universities are to be storehouses of knowledge and to foster “imagination, creativity and contribution to society” (21), as well as to enrich “our” culture (23), promote “social harmony” (2), “embody the values which are central to a democratic society” (92) and render “our democracy” healthier (92). At the end of one paragraph on economic effects of education, the phrase “social and cultural contribution” crops up (36), and at the end of another there is lip-service to “reaching out... [to] the wider community” (38)²². But these are afterthoughts, never backed up with

²² It is quite possible that references to “contribution to society” themselves have sinister overtones. It is not necessarily the case, for instance, that effective social research will contribute to social stability. It may also have a role in uncovering power relations, “injustice” and oppression, and this role may lead to increased social conflict. One could challenge, for instance, the idea that there is “a strong positive correlation between the cohesiveness of local communities and participation in higher education” (59) as an example of class prejudice. Since communities with large proportions of graduates are likely to be upper- and middle-class (given the statistics on class access to H.E. discussed elsewhere), it is not surprising that these communities appear

concrete policies in the way that the “economic” claims are. (The document doesn’t even say what exactly the “values... central to a democratic society” are). It is simply assumed that universities will continue to perform their other roles, even while reduced to the status of mass-production factories churning out “skilled” workers for “business”. To take an example, sections 1.1 to 1.3 list the values of higher education according to the government (10). These sections include seven references to economic benefits directly (e.g. “equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills”), two ambiguous ones (e.g. “foundation of human progress”) and only two which refer to non-economic values (“social well-being” and “human knowledge”). This clearly suggests that non-economic roles are secondary and an afterthought. While economic concerns warrant long sections of specific proposals, the most the paper has to say on other concerns is that they will be met in unspecified ways. For instance, “[w]e will continue to support higher education institutions in their role as community leaders, celebrating the cultural and social contribution they make” (37). Yet clearly the government’s proposals will severely reduce this “contribution”. When the non-economic roles are specified, they turn out to look very like the economic roles - for instance, supporting schools, local health services and social services, and so on (41).

The biased perceptions involved in the discussion are clear from the way in which what is good for “employers” is assumed to be good for everyone else as well. Hence, whatever employers demand, they get. Since “employer surveys reveal concerns about the skills of graduates, particularly in terms of communication and other “soft” skills” (15), the government assumes the problem must be rectified. Since employers are more likely to employ people in jobs usually staffed by graduates, it is “in the country’s interest to expand higher education” (16). The government also suggests that its proposals make universities “engines for applying... knowledge for the benefit of all” (21). This “all” seems, however, to be very limited. In another passage, “quality of life” is treated as equivalent with “economy” (23). Indeed, the government clearly reduces the former to the latter. “[I]mprovements in our quality of life depend on the effectiveness of knowledge sharing between business and higher education” (36). Yet there is no reason why benefits for business will also affect the “quality of life” of anyone else. Effective “knowledge sharing” between indigenous peoples and multinational corporations has led, not to a higher “quality of life”, but to bio-piracy and other forms of exploitation. Also, the corporatisation of education will harm the “quality of life” of many people, especially those who fall outside the model of the ideal worker and who can’t or won’t acquire the characteristics capitalists now demand under the guise of “employability”.

cohesive to middle-class researchers. This may partly be because they avoid the forms of so-called “breakdown” which result from poverty, but it may also be because the researcher prefers traits associated with her/his own community. In any case, when working-class communities become cohesive (for instance, during the Miners’ Strike), this is not something governments usually welcome. It is far better from the standpoint of the powerful to keep them divided, weak and frightened. Another possible danger is that the idea that universities should promote “harmony” and “democratic” values could be used as a pretext for McCarthy-style witch-hunts.

Thus, the focus is in fact on one particular, narrow group of people, the “employers” or capitalists, whose demands are assumed to stand for the interests of society in general. One of the chapters is supposed to be about expanding H.E. “to meet our needs” (57), yet the “we” in question is decidedly parochial. When Blair promises “real world” relevance, it is of great significance to ask in whose eyes a particular concern is deemed “real”. Someone reading the phrase “knowledge transfer” might be reminded of the work of the radical pedagogue Paolo Freire, or the calls of some of the “deschoolers” to spread knowledge outside the confines of institutions. On closer inspection, not only is it to remain institutionalised, it is to be “transferred” solely to one group of people. “Knowledge Exchanges” qualify as such only on the basis of the knowledge they transfer to “businesses”, not on the basis of their ability to popularise or explain knowledge to a wider audience. Perhaps a wider form of “knowledge transfer” - for instance, wider public awareness of research into media bias and dissimulation - would be to the advantage of the “wider community”, yet the sole emphasis in the government’s proposals is on accessibility to “business”. Any influence on the “wider community” or on “public life” is mediated solely by “business”. For instance, the Regional Partnership section is supposed to deal with the “key leadership role” of universities in “community capacity building and regeneration”, as well as their “contribution to civil society”. However, all the specific proposals are about “regional skills, business, and economic development” (40). Similarly, the “major vehicle for expansion in higher education” is not a type of degree of the usual type, but the glorified training regimens of so-called Foundation Degrees (43), which are also to become the “standard” H.E. qualification (61). The government’s Skills Strategy is about “ensuring that the education and training system responds effectively to demand from employers” (58). Hence, when Charles Clarke says he wants to “mobiliz[e]... the imagination, creativity, skills and talents of all our people” and “to help turn ideas into successful businesses” (2), it is clear that he is engaged in a logic of entrapment. Creative energies are to be harnessed, for a single goal: capitalist control.

The government’s version of a “real world” problem clearly means a capitalist problem. However, the real world is not limited to the world of “business”. Contrary to government assumptions, academic staff do not set out to be as irrelevant as possible. It is simply that their view of what is of real significance may differ from the government’s. For instance, historians maintain that it is necessary to understand the past to understand the present, and theologians would claim (quite rightly) that their research meets the “real world” concerns of millions of religious people. To take a couple of examples of political theorists, Slavoj Žižek claims to be studying “the fantasies of wholeness and inclusion which make up human society” and John Rawls is pursuing “new insights into the questions of justice in our pluralistic society”. The work of Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Hardt and Negri is of sufficient “real world” relevance to turn up in the discourse of political protest groups in Italy. And of

course, this very paper is directed solely at the “real world”, in the very immediate sense of “policy relevance”. None of these projects, however, falls within the New Labour agenda of “real world” relevance, at least as shown by the procedures they wish to use to determine such relevance. In other words, none of these projects is likely to be attractive to “employers”. By “real world”, they seem to mean the world as viewed by one narrow group, capitalists (or in government rhetoric, “employers” and “business”). This group’s conception of the world is taken to be the entirety of what is “real”, and other voices are silenced. As Guattari puts it, “Whether you are happy, whether you stutter, whether you are afraid of death or of old age - all this counts for nothing. That is modern capitalism: desire, madness, gratuitousness - all this counts for nothing! On the contrary, it inconveniences. It makes too much “noise”, in the sense of information theory” (Guattari Reader p. 137). The resultant “real world” is not, therefore, the real world, but a faint echo of it. Indeed, New Labour is in many respects advocating an agenda which *avoids* the real world, since research into (say) colonial violence and the suppressed voices of the postcolonial world is to be pushed out and replaced by “business incubators” and “skill development”.

Further, it is interesting to contrast the construction of what “employers” want/need and the construction of what students want/need, since the two occur together in phrases such as: “serve both our economy’s needs, and our young people” (62). Whereas the former are to be directly involved in forming courses, deciding what is to be funded and “incentivised” and what skills are to be taught, the latter arise only indirectly. One sees this in the contradiction between “the demands of employers” and “the needs of the economy and students” (60): employers have self-positing demands to which everyone else is obliged to submit, whereas students have “needs” asserted a priori by the government. Employers’ demands are established through devices such as surveys (15), and are to be directly expressed to universities in the course of “highly interactive” exchanges (37) and day-to-day “communities of practice” (38). Further, the Lambert Review has been established for the purpose of asking “business” what it wants from higher education (31), and sector skills organisations, as well as teaching quality bodies, are to ensure universities have “up to date knowledge of employer needs in each vocational area”. These organisations will “engage employers with institutions” on issues including staffing and curriculum development (42). Capitalists are even to “play a role in designing courses” for the new Foundation Degrees, to ensure that these provide “the skills that are really needed in work” (42). Even the new teaching quality agency is to “work closely with the emerging sector skills council, which will be led by employers” (53). The government is committed to “involving employers properly in the design of courses” (61). Everything has been done short of calling in psychics to read capitalists’ minds.

In contrast, students' "needs" are asserted as if known, and it often appears that any resemblance of the "students" in question to real persons is purely coincidental. Student "needs" are arrogantly asserted in such a way that students are expressly excluded from how these "needs" are constructed. For instance, propping up "weaker" institutions "is not in the interests of the student" (80), and flexibility is supposed to "meet the needs of a more diverse student body" (7). The government also claims that its "vision" will meet "the developing needs of students" (22). These claims are simply asserted. It is never explained how the government has established what students want or need. There is only one instance of a survey of student views, on the issue (peripheral to the main argument) of teaching standards (46)²³. Certainly students are given no overarching role similar to that assigned to employers. Rather, students are to be given what the government decides they "need", i.e. what is best for them - which seems in fact to mean what is best for the "employers". If students' demands had the same weight as employers' demands, one could expect the government to use the demand for places as a guide for expansion, rather than trying to push students into so-called "shortage" subjects. Government proposals are actually counterposed to what students and potential students need (for instance, grants). Perhaps what the government means by "students' needs" is "the need to be the kind of person the government and employers want - or else". The "needs" are not those of students, but those of a particular type of person demanded in advance, those of a well-functioning cog. As Bertolt Brecht once put it, if sharks ruled the world they would teach the little fish that it is a great honour to swim into the mouth of a shark. A Blairite shark would add that they have a "need" to do so.

Also, while "business" is to be serviced like a king, nobody seems to be asking any other section of the population what they want from higher education. For saying the reforms are supposed to make higher education benefit "everyone" or "society in general", there is little discussion of anyone's views, or needs, except for "business". For instance, there are no surveys and reviews asking workers if universities might better serve their interests, or asking unemployed people what kinds of research they would like to see done. There is no concern about making research useful to political activists, charities, or the global poor. The government will ensure that businesses can access knowledge from H.E. (37), but there is no concern about its accessibility to anyone else. The "real world" issues the paper addresses do not include challenging widespread dogmas or encouraging the development of scholarly virtues in society at large. The "real world" is limited to the world of the capitalists. It is not,

²³ This exception is probably due to the fact that the government intends to use student pressure as a means of disciplining staff. An image of "failing" teaching staff could be used in the same way it has been used in primary education, to demoralise staff, isolate any potential resistance by making it seem to be a result of an attempt to defend "failure", and use pressure from below to reinforce the demands for conformity to quantitative and formalised "standards" emanating from above. The more students feel their failings to be due to "failing teachers", the more pressed academics will feel to defend their reputations by referring to measurable criteria of competence and aptitude.

therefore “everyone” who is benefiting from these reforms, but only a particular, narrow group. Worryingly, however, the government seems to assume that the capitalists’ interests represent those of everyone. For instance, they claim that “enhanc[ing] the relationship between business and higher education” is “for the good of our workforce and economy” (45). Therefore, what benefits capitalists is assumed to benefit workers also - even though the two groups often have diametrically opposed goals and “interests”. Only capital has a voice in the process of change, yet labour is also assumed somehow to benefit. The rhetoric is disturbingly reminiscent of remarks by Mao Zedong, such as that “cultural workers... must be imbued with the spirit of serving the people and must work hard. Provided they serve the people creditably, all intellectuals should be esteemed and regarded as valuable national and social assets... The old type of cultural and educational workers... should be given suitable re-education so that they can acquire a new outlook and new methods to serve the people” (SW3 255). “The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part” (70). The only real difference between this rhetoric and the government’s is that the latter wants research to serve “business”, not the “people”. Whereas the Maoist *gleichschaltung* was intended to serve the people through the ruling party, the Blairite *gleichschaltung* is supposed to serve “everyone” by meeting the demands made by bosses. The government also shares the Maoist disposition to force students to spend time working (see 67).

If the government decides what students “need”, it follows that students are not qualified to decide what they wish to study. Indeed, when it comes to discussing what students really want, the government is downright dismissive. Preferences for traditional honours courses rather than vocational qualifications is taken to be a “cycle of low esteem” and a “social and cultural prejudice against vocational education”, allegedly transferred to students via the “labour market premium” offered by “employers” (17, 61). It is asserted, not established, that this is the reason students prefer honours courses. Since this “prejudice” goes against “focusing on the skills [students] really need”, it follows that the government will manipulate outcomes by funding additional places for their preferred kind of course and offer “financial incentives” to induce students into them (57). The government, with its patronising claim to know what students “need”, is to “help individuals to make sensible and appropriate choices”, choices which just happen to be the same ones which meet “demand from employers” (58). To do this, they will “incentivise the supply of and the demand for foundation degrees” and ensure that they are “priced competitively” (61). In other words, if students won’t reject their “prejudices”, the government will make sure they can’t afford to heed them. This idea that opposing the government’s agenda is “prejudice” also underpins the assumption that they can “maintain the quality standards” of the present H.E. system even while introducing their agenda (60), since it is “important that any expanded provision is of the high quality that we expect from higher education” (62). It is, of course, only a “prejudice” if it involves unfair

assumptions about vocational courses. (One would not, for instance, say that “politicians suffer from social and cultural prejudice against smug liars”). One might quite rationally challenge the idea that a course in which one is systematically moulded into the kind of person demanded by “employers” is equivalent in value to one in which creativity, analysis and free thought are at least somewhat important. After all, the foundation degrees are not only to be a year shorter than proper degrees, they are also to be shaped by capitalists (42). Perhaps students simply want something better than indoctrination from their university.

There is no way that “quality standards” can remain at present levels while the bulk of the H.E. sector is reduced to the role of a production line to churn out skilled workers for “employers”. For all the glorification and the attempts to sow seeds of confusion (for instance, by allowing foundation degree “graduates” to put initials after their name)²⁴, Foundation Degrees would simply not be of the same quality as traditional degrees. Indeed, they can hardly even be called “education”, since they do not involve the drawing out of critical, contemplative, creative and analytical skills. They are simply a glorified system of job training, mistakenly carried out in universities instead of workplaces and subsidised from the pockets of students and taxpayers instead of companies. The claim that people who have done foundation degrees could then go on to qualify for a full degree on a further year’s study (64) is absurd. It is also an insult to the students who have already done two years of actual degree study²⁵. Perhaps students would be rather better off without government “help” to make “appropriate choices”: give them a proper grant and let them make their own minds up whether the “foundation degrees” are really all they are touted to be. Then, maybe, they could take account of factors other than the “employability” blackmail in deciding what kind of study is to be their way of life for several years.

“Young people’s aspirations” is another term which crops up in several places (e.g. 8). It is one of the “cultural” expressions beloved of a government trying to avoid discussing how its funding proposals have reduced access. “If we succeed in raising aspirations among non-

²⁴ There is a real problem that contemporary society tends to demean manual workers, but the roots of this problem are wealth inequality, capitalist power and neo-liberal ideology. It is not possible to rectify the problem by, say, giving every dustbin collector an FSc in Refuse Management. Nor is it desirable for access to growing swathes of the job market to be made dependent on possession of ever-changing qualifications which workers have to pay for through fees and loans. On the one hand, Blair is attacking institutions of education, but on the other, he is expanding the institutionalisation of education by implicitly imposing formal qualification requirements on a growing range of sectors.

²⁵ The government has also come up with the smart idea that students should be able to take ordinary three-year degrees over two years, using the summer holidays as an extra semester (65). Unless the students in question are Superman, and/or dosed up on amphetamines, there is no possible way they could complete the required study adequately over such a period. Most students can barely meet existing demands and deadlines. One simply cannot absorb difficult material non-stop without rest for two years. This kind of proposal suggests that those who compile government policy really know very little about how students and universities operate. Of course, it would again be the poorer students who would be under pressure to forfeit an extra year’s study to save on fees, debt and time out of work.

traditional students, many more of them will apply” (72). Therefore, the government tries to achieve through “AimHigher Roadshows” what it can only achieve with decent grants. “Raise aspirations” also seems to mean “subjectify as consumers/investors”. Of course, the whole issue of whether the government is reducing student access is an empirical one, but it always arises in this document as a set of vague assertions and a decisiveness more apparent in words than deeds. The White Paper goes out of its way to elide any suggestion that the reason for class inequalities in education, or for access problems of other kinds, has anything to do with the introduction of pay-to-learn and the abolition of grants. “We do not want the financial support arrangements to act as a barrier to students” (103), says the White Paper, yet one could so easily reach the opposite view. Instead of more money, students are to receive financial counselling (71), a poor substitute. The government’s proposals are supposed to ensure that “potential is recognised and fostered wherever it is found” (67). However, there will be less of a “second chance” under these proposals, since the possibilities for students who fail to get into the “best” universities are limited. “The best” will also be limited to those who can afford massive fees or a huge debt. Ironically, the proposals may mean that, while those who wish to study are pushed out by top-up fees, those who do not are pushed into the education system through demands that “job seekers” enter training.

There is also a rather strange claim that the government’s agenda will increase student choice, through “an increasingly rich variety of subjects to study, which keep pace with changes in society and the economy” (17). Education will therefore attract “people with different demands and commitments” (63), and the government’s reforms will “make student choice a much more powerful force, and help choice drive quality” (84). It is not in fact clear that the variety of subjects would either grow or become rich under the government’s plans. Rather, a large number of “traditional” (though rich and varied) courses would become less widely available. While there may also be a blossoming of different vocational courses, these will conform to a single, unchangeable model of capitalistic skill-training, hardly a recipe for richness and variety. Further, even if the content of courses is rich and varied, the range of subjectivities they are supposed to express is vastly reduced. Only “investors” with an eye to their economic future are welcome. This is not, therefore, a system for people with “different demands and commitments”, but rather, a system for people of a single, homogeneous type. The “difference” is to be functional differentiation among people whose role is fundamentally the same, and the student “choice” which “drives quality” is going to be the empty choice between Coke University and the Institute of Pepsi.

Even putting aside the disastrous effects this agenda could have on higher education, it is worth speculating for a moment on whether this is really good for the economy, or fair to students. Students and taxpayers are being told to pay (or repay) for an education system which is to function entirely to the benefit of “employers”. Students are to be “independent

learners investing in the continuous improvement of their skills”, so as to “sustain their employability” (16). In other words, bosses are to be allowed to make jobs conditional on particular skills, which workers are then to be forced to acquire out of their own pocket. Why, then, are employers not being “asked” to foot the bill? Why should students pay to acquire “skills” which employers demand they have, instead of employers paying directly? After all, there have always been skilled workers. Prior to the neo-liberal disaster, most of these workers were trained on the job or through apprenticeships. This way, “employers” could choose for themselves which “skills” to teach, and trainees received a wage (albeit a poor one) and usually a job at the end of it. Trainees did not end up with the equivalent of a mortgage around their necks, and “employers” did not interfere in universities. Why is the same activity now being organised by the government, at the expense of students/trainees and taxpayers? And why is it being allowed to colonise and destroy institutions which were set up for completely different purposes? What, also, if employers who previously accepted untrained workers now demand that their workers have newly invented qualifications, and what if those who provide apprentices are “de-incentivised” from doing so? Under the White Paper proposals, people are not only being forced to conform to a model of the “employable” citizen under threat of bankruptcy - they are being made to pay for the “privilege”. If “employers” have an “interest” in graduates’ “skills”, then why shouldn’t they be the ones paying for universities, instead of students?

There is another disturbing tendency here, also: a move from a differentiated system, in which students succeed through knowledge of a particular subject area, rigour and/or originality in research, and creative and/or analytical thought, towards a system in which all students are expected to conform to a rigid model of the ideal worker with an unchanging list of “core skills” imposed regardless of the course one is studying. Universities are, for instance, praised for “building key employability skills into courses” (42), and “we need to ensure that all graduates, including those who study traditional academic disciplines, have the right skills to equip them for a lifetime in a fast changing work environment” by learning employer-oriented skills in all courses (44). This is especially problematic given that the likes of “communication” (15), “working with others” and “enterprise” (44) are being listed as “skills”. Being “enterprising” is a character-trait, not a skill, and “communication” is not an individual “skill” since it is dialogical. If X and Y have problems communicating, this may not necessarily be because either lacks a “skill”; both may be perfectly comprehensible in other situations, but may have problems understanding each other. If Joe doesn’t speak French and Pierre doesn’t speak English, it is clearly discriminatory to say that only one of them lacks language skills. If bosses have a problem with workers’ “communication skills”, this may

actually be because they are not listening well enough²⁶. Perhaps “communication skills” is actually a euphemism for the attributes of communicative practice associated with the bosses’ own background, in which case, the idea that workers “lack communication skills” is a demeaning way of saying that they have a different communicative culture²⁷. The same applies to working with others: effective cooperative practice is a result of similar or negotiated understandings, and cooperation is easier between some people than others. The effect may well be to discriminate against those people who lack these skills or attributes, across all subject-areas. (It is simply incorrect to assume that everyone can be “prepared” for a narrow model of “employability”; there are those who, for reasons of disability, psychological difference or simply eccentricity are not able to conform to the norms of communication, cooperation and “enterprise” the government demands)²⁸. At present, someone with too little creativity for the arts may become a scientist instead, and someone with too little analytical skill for the sciences might study the arts. In the future, there is a danger that someone who does not meet “employers’” demands for a list of specific “skills” (or conformity to particular models of subjectivity) may be unable to qualify for a degree in any subject. This is clearly a net increase in social exclusion, especially disturbing since it is likely to affect those who are already discriminated against in the workplace²⁹. It is also

²⁶ This is a phenomenon encountered repeatedly among people working in low-status jobs. Bosses assume that workers will not only understand but accept and agree with everything they say, and if workers fail, or refuse, to do this, they are considered to be deficient in their “communication skills”. In other cases, bosses refuse to listen when workers state the obvious - for instance, that shortcomings are due to understaffing rather than workers’ “performance”. In such contexts, it is no surprise that “communication” is often a problem. Indeed, bosses’ recalcitrance sometimes gives workers an interest in communicating less effectively than they otherwise would. The less bosses know, the more workers are allowed to get on with their jobs without interference.

²⁷ To some extent, students are already expected to be able to communicate, but they are expected to communicate in the specific theoretical “language” of the discipline or subject-area they study. For instance, a science student might be expected to write informative and well-structured reports on experiments, and a student of theory might be expected to show a familiarity with and ability to engage with the specialist vocabularies of theorists in her/his area. If this is not taken to be “communication skills” as meant by the government, presumably they mean not an ability to communicate but an ability to communicate to a particular audience, in a particular vocabulary. In other words, they intend to replace the exciting, engaging and subject-responsive multiplicity of academic vocabularies with a single corporate Newspeak, so that all students learn to speak and accept the vocabulary of the people who say “incentivise” a lot.

²⁸ One might speculate that the idea of “employability” involves the introduction of *moral* criteria for graduation and for employment. In any case, such standards are clearly not in anyone’s “interest” save the bosses. If bosses are given a right to demand that workers conform to a particular model of the self, and sufficient numbers of people are trained to conform to this model, the result is, firstly, that workers are increasingly denied individuality, secondly, that those unable or unwilling to conform are excluded and subjected to state harassment to conform (e.g. through “job seeker” training), and thirdly, that workers as a group are weakened by being denied the use of strategies incompatible with the pliable model of the self which capitalists demand. Even if one accepts that the capitalists’ drive towards such subjective demands on workers is unstoppable (which one shouldn’t), the imperative should be to protect those who are vulnerable to such expectations, not to extend practices of normalisation so as to aid the capitalists’ own control project. Otherwise, the result is what might be called “social cleansing”: a systematic exclusion from all social institutions, and usually from income also, of anyone who does not conform to a narrowly conceived model of the self. We are reminded of Ebenezer Scrooge’s demand that if the poor would rather die than go to workhouses, let them do it, and decrease the surplus population.

²⁹ For example, some students may have difficulty with “communicating” and “teamwork” activities, due to psychological differences or simply social awkwardness. This is not necessarily “rectifiable” by training, even

worth noting that, while the government's descriptive narrative suggests that there is only a need for "more" people with these skills, their incorporation into courses suggests that *all* people will be expected to develop them (or else).

A further problem is that the government assumption that being a graduate raises income will soon collapse as more and more areas of work require "foundation degrees" and the like. The present link between earnings and degrees reflects the present university system. The government admits that "employers" still prefer graduates to have degrees rather than vocational qualifications. Why, then, do they assume that the correlation will continue after their "reforms" are in place? A more likely effect is that, firstly, "traditional" degrees will become a better indicator of class than they are at present; secondly, that "employers" will therefore continue to employ "traditional" graduates in the best-paid jobs (since upper and upper-middle class people will continue to study for such degrees, at the fee-charging universities); and thirdly, that people with foundation degrees will be admitted to relatively low-paid jobs. Since the foundation degrees are part of an expansion of higher "education", this means that people who would formerly have got jobs without needing a degree will now be required to obtain such a "foundation degree" at their own expense. The wages or salaries for such jobs are unlikely to increase, since if anything the new "degrees" will increase job market saturation. Furthermore, the number of people receiving the "benefits" (even in the economic, let alone the personal and cultural sense) of higher education in the full sense of the term will be substantially reduced. Social mobility will be harmed, with the British people reduced to a pool of malleable "skilled" workers for ready for "use" by multinational corporations.

Conclusion

Virtually all the commentary on the subject of the White Paper in both the specialist press and the media more generally has been negative. Why then did we feel moved to commit our own thoughts to paper when so much has already been said? What seems evident to us is that there is actually deep ambivalence about the proposals, one that can be noted amongst those who might otherwise have been expected to have been hostile to it, such as the AUT. The promise of more resources in particular has served to implant a note of uncertainty about the Government's real motivations. How can a Government offering "more" somehow be offering "less" in terms of the picture of HE considered in the round? As we noted in our

were such a project of normalisation desirable. At present, such people - discriminated against in the workplace - may find niches in higher education. There is a danger that this will change if "core skills" assessment is expanded. The further a single model of subjectivity expands, the less space remains for people who do not fit the model in question. In this case, problems associated with "social exclusion" are bound to worsen. The neo-liberals are creating their nemesis: a dispossessed stratum with no place in the social order, driven by desperation and exclusion to do anything they have to in order to survive (or fight back).

introductory comments we think the time for ambivalence concerning this as well as most other New Labour initiatives is long gone. It is time in other words, for us to recognise the problem before us which is an unwillingness to see a public goods as anything more than private benefits awaiting “sell-off.” Education is we think much more than a “service” whose benefits are calculable in narrowly economic terms. It is the lifeblood of a civilised society, which is in turn characterised by its capacity to question itself, to think about its own ends and purposes, to change and reform itself in line with the preferences, needs and wants of the people who compose it. To deny this function, to subordinate education to the needs of “business” - as is proposed here - is to transform not only education, but public life more generally into a dismally utilitarian concern that Gradgrind himself would have been embarrassed to have been associated with. More seriously, it is to deny us the means of thinking about, questioning, discussing, and changing our own environment. It is to render a population mute before forces that are immeasurably stronger than any particular individual subject to it, and to make us mere means for ends that are beyond our control. Kant defined Enlightenment as freedom “from self-incurred tutelage” and thereby identified the educated mind as the goal of any “modern” society. Today, we are confronted by a new form of tutelage, tutelage to the market, to “enterprise” and “employability” that in turn threatens to “roll-back” this idea of the independent, autonomous, self-directed individual. The White Paper represents and endorses a new tutelage, and as such is a betrayal of the values once proudly represented by the Labour Party, but now so brusquely set aside in the search for new accommodations to the needs of business. The Paper is a fraud, indeed an insult to the intelligence of all those genuinely concerned about the nature of education. Its implementation must be resisted by all means available.