

**Communiqué from CDBU ‘After the Election’ event**  
held on Wednesday 20 March 2013, Royal Society, London

*After the Election: Alternatives in Higher Education Policy* was the first event in the CDBU’s proposed rolling ‘Commission on the Future of Higher Education’. Its purpose was to begin a conversation among members, with input from other interested parties, that will enable CDBU to formulate clear policy positions before the 2015 UK General Election. Its presiding mood was to be exploratory, and to begin to outline some key areas for our work; and to ensure that Members of CDBU have as full a part as possible in determining our priorities and directions.

There were three panel presentations, each followed by discussion from the floor, followed by a final general discussion among all attendees. The following is a very brief digest of some key themes that emerged. It also indicates areas for future debate and negotiation within CDBU itself.

All now agreed that, while on-going critique of the present governmental dispensation continues to be indispensable, it is also now more urgent that we start to provide positive alternative models and possibilities for the sector.

The papers will be available via audio-link on the website soon.

**The summary position:**

CDBU is encouraged to rehabilitate the complexity of *homo sapiens* over the narrow restrictions of *homo oeconomicus*. In doing so, we need to re-awaken principles of autonomy and creativity; and this will help us achieve a position where we can extend participation, opportunity and capabilities. The present dispensation cannot be sustained by government, given its inherent financial and ideological flaws. CDBU is encouraged to take a position endorsing a yet wider participation, and finding a mode of increasing student numbers against the emerging trends; but this will involve a critique of an ‘efficiency-myth’ which encourages a belief in the increase of quality for less financial input. It will also involve finding a mode of increasing the range and diversity of the sector. Key to this shift will be a rehabilitation of the primacy of academic judgement, as well as of judgements made about and of the academy itself. CDBU must attend to that very substantial constituency of part-time students, who are currently marginalised and in danger of being effectively ignored under the present disposition; and this is all the more important when we consider life-long learning and the necessity of re-training for many of today’s students whose work-expectancy is likely to extend over some forty-five years or more. The Fees debate is alive; but it needs to be quickened by our finding a way of addressing the negative political will surrounding the University. Academics need to rediscover ways of engaging with central decision-making bodies in their institutions. Students are co-workers in this demand. By working together, CDBU will find ways of rehabilitating the idea of active responsibility – not just for learning and teaching and research, but also for the public good of the University’s general standing.

## Detailed summary:

### Panel 1:

Speakers were Howard Hotson, Peter Scott, Martin Hall; chaired by Martin McQuillan.

**Howard Hotson** extended his critique of the flawed Browne Review of 2010. In doing so, he indicated how some of the intrinsic flaws in the government's post-Browne policy have begun to contribute to an unravelling of the policy itself. He indicated the key danger that, in what remains, there is a clear tendency to stratification of the sector, as opposed to its differentiation or diversification. His case was that we now need to propose a fundamental reconceptualization of the University institution and its principles and purposes; and that we need to find a way of speaking to a general public (however difficult to identify) that will win support.

At the core of this, Hotson argued, is an argument that reclaims our position as *homo sapiens*, and to use this as the basis of resistance to a prevailing spirit that reduces our human being to the eviscerated and skeletal *homo oeconomicus*.

**Peter Scott** followed this with a slightly different position. He argued that it is unlikely that all CDBU members and colleagues will easily find total agreement on a single proposition for the future of our institutions. Instead of establishing a final and determining position, CDBU can and should stand for argument and diversity of views. This, however, should not stop us from resisting a government that, while shrinking the State ideologically and thereby reducing its commitment to the University, nonetheless uses the instrumental of State power to control our institutions. Our opposition and resistance might include highlighting the unintended consequences of the governmental position, and resisting a growing corporatism that is grounded in the erosion of trust. In place of this, we might stand more clearly for autonomy and creativity as fundamental values.

**Martin Hall** extended further a criticism that is already showing the financial unsustainability of the present Fees-and-competition dispensation, while adding to this the observation that, for VCs, planning has become virtually impossible thanks to the precariousness that is intrinsic to a supposed marketised sector. He stressed the massive success of Widening Participation over the recent decades; and argued that we need to re-balance the relation between public good and private benefit in the sector. His case is that we need what he calls 'radical stability' (indicating that radicalism itself paradoxically requires some stability); and that this should enable the extension of three straightforward goods: participation, opportunity, and capability.

Among contributions from the floor was an encouragement to consider present developments in a global context: British institutions are not alone in facing down a dangerous direction of ideological travel. There was also a reminder that CDBU needs to continue to extend its own internal constituency.

**Panel 2:**

Speakers were Bahram Bekhradnia, Roger Brown, Claire Callender; chaired by MM McCabe

**Bahram Bekhradnia** argued that one of the failures of the present system is that student choice has actually been reduced rather than enlarged, that the system is dysfunctional, and that we are seeing part-time registration going into free-fall. His view is that we should stand for further increases in student numbers, on the simple ground that more education is better than less. Additionally, we should embrace diversity, while retaining a holistic view of the sector. Key to this will be making an argument that we should get adequate funding for the required quality: quality cannot be maintained through a myth of ever-increased efficiency that claims greater output for ever-reducing input.

**Roger Brown** argued for a longer historical view of reforms that would allow us to see that the real issue has been one of an incremental tendency to reduce State financial interest in the sector. He pointed to how markets, at least in HE, work to reduce choice; and argued that the University needs to retain and to highlight its uniqueness, its difference from commercial sector institutions. The University is indeed a special case, in that the rules of marketization do not apply as they do elsewhere. He suggested that we should rewind research selectivity, that we should show how public funds are sometimes diverted away from teaching and towards branding, that we should argue for a restoration of HEFCE teaching-grant. Above all, we should reclaim the principles and responsibilities of academic judgement.

**Claire Callender** drew attention to the fact that the reforms all presuppose a specific kind of student: the full-time school-leaver. The facts, however, are different; and therefore the reforms miss a large part of the central point. Some 30% of all undergraduates are part-time; since 2010, the drop in part-time registrations has reached some 40%. This constituency, while not the majority, is such a substantial minority that the realities of the situation are simply not being adequately considered, far less addressed. Part-time students face a series of additional brakes on the possibilities for their engagement in University education. To address this, we will need to address the issue of political will in government and opposition.

Among contributions from the floor were issues regarding the attack on academic judgements in some institutions, where (for reasons of branding and league-table success) administration essentially over-rules or determines academic judgements. Additionally, there were observations about life-long learning: given the life- and work-expectancy of the current generation, it is likely that they may have to re-train up to three times in a working life.

**Panel 3:**

Speakers were William Cullerne Bown, Andrew McGettigan, Rachel Wenstone; chaired by Tamson Pietsch

**William Cullerne Bown** outlined 'Options for a 6k Fees model', as a potential model to be adopted by an incoming 2015 government. He urged CDBU to consider a question that is often overlooked: we should ask who are the winners in the present dispensation, as well as acknowledging who loses. Central to this is an examination of prestige and privilege across education more generally. For many, A-level and other entry qualifications are the most important examination. For it is these that determine which institution a student enters. The institutional prestige can be greater than the intrinsic quality of the degree. He pointed out the various ways in which the finance models for the 9k Fees are fundamentally concerned with accounting, and with enhancing the appearance of the government's financial capabilities.

**Andrew McGettigan** extended the financial critique in more forensic detail still, urging CDBU to find ways of addressing the extraordinary complexity of University financing and accounting practices. These sometimes share the same levels of precariousness as we saw in the wider sub-prime financial crisis since 2008. He argued that we will get beyond a minimalist or 'negative freedom' defence if we can see the financial basics that support our institutional structures. To do this, however, we need to address the crisis of university governance, in which the status of the academic within our institutions has been systematically degraded in a process whereby academics are, at best, in extremely small minority positions in the decision-making bodies of the institution.

**Rachel Wenstone** argued for students as co-creators of the academic project as such. The body-metaphor of having student 'at the heart' of the system can be re-thought more appropriately as having students as 'the hands' of the system: engaged actively and not at all as passive consumers. She argued that a logic of competition and competitiveness has fed into the structures of increased social inequality, and questioned the University's complicity with this. She drew specific attention to issues of outsourcing in our institutions, and pointed out that this depends on students and their fee-income being used to produce profit for private-sector concerns. In place of this, we need to re-discover and prioritise students as co-workers who can help us restore principles of wide active responsibility, not just to learning, teaching and research, but rather to the whole social function of the University.

Contributions from the floor gave further examples of financial problems, addressing some specific cases. There was welcome endorsement of the idea of awakening our institutions to their wide responsibilities, both to those within the academy and to those who can sustain our activities in the wider social domain.