

# Lifelong Learning and the Future of Higher Education

IFLL Sector Paper 8



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(England and Wales)

21 De Montfort Street

Leicester

LE1 7GE

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NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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## Foreword

This is the eighth of the Sector Papers to be published from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Sector Papers will discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: early childhood, schools, family learning, further education, higher education, private training providers, voluntary and community organisations, local authorities, learning cities, cultural organisations, and local learning ecologies. The goal here is to encourage innovative thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.

The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and will produce its main report in September 2009. It is sponsored by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the Inquiry can be found at [www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry](http://www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry).

The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK. This involves:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public;
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

### IFLL: supplementary papers

The Sector Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Thematic Papers*. These relate nine broad themes, such as demography, technology or migration, to lifelong learning. Each one reviews evidence submitted to the Inquiry, and then draws together strands from the debate into a synthesis of the issues, with key messages.
- *Context Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. The goal is to provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning, i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide evidence on these effects, and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.

- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others, this strand consists not of a series of papers but a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments or learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

Published papers are available from the IFLL website:

[www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk)



Professor Tom Schuller  
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson  
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

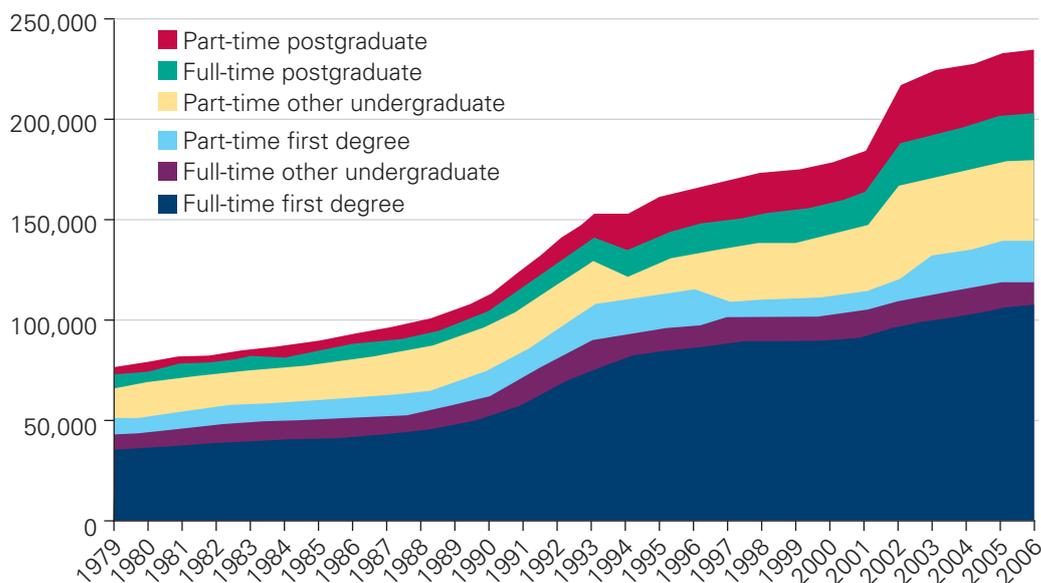
## Introduction

This short paper is based upon the discussion at the IFLL seminar on Higher Education (HE) held in October 2008 and at the North of England Education Conference in Chester in January 2009. I am grateful to participants on both occasions for their advice. It is structured around ten propositions.

### Higher education and lifelong learning: ten propositions

The first is that the *UK has a system that is already, by international standards, very lifelong learning friendly*. You can see this in patterns of participation and in institutional diversity.

Figure 1: Number of students by mode of study and level of course, 1979–2006



Source: DES 1991–1992; DfE 1994; HESA 1996–2008

Compared to the rest of the EU, the UK apparently has: the highest percentage of part-time students; the highest average age of participants; the highest percentage of students with disabilities (although classification is notoriously difficult here); and the second highest rate of working-class participation (behind Finland). It also has the lowest rate of ‘study from home’, and the second lowest level of recruitment to ‘regional’ institutions.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, we have an extraordinarily diverse and high-

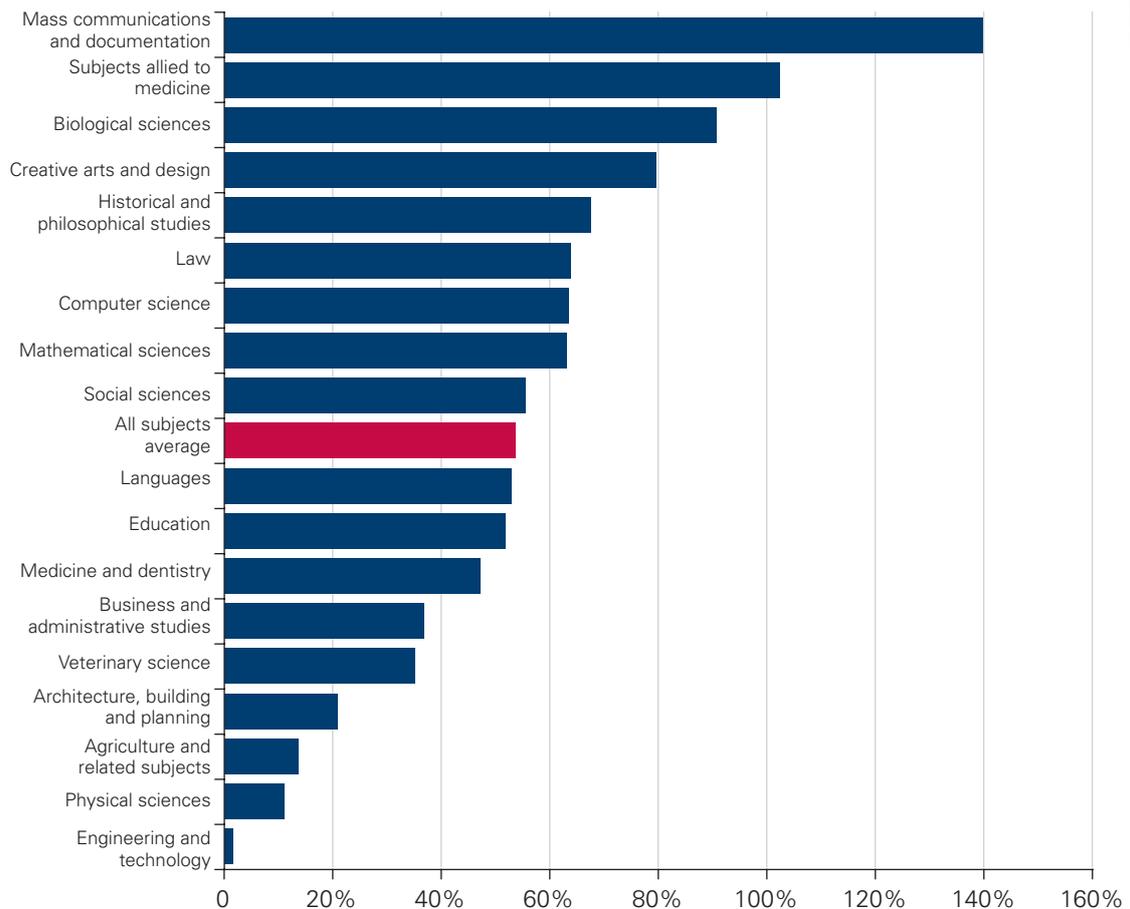
<sup>1</sup> Slowey and Watson (2003).

performing system (for example, the recent Research Assessment Exercise found ‘world-leading’ research in 49 institutions – over one third of the total).

The second is that *recent public policy has tended to go against, rather than with, the grain of a lifelong learning system*. You can see this in the ways in which funding systems favour the participation of young, full-time, first-time students studying away from home. The current *débauche* over equivalent and lower qualifications (ELQ) – i.e. not funding students with ELQs – is another example.

Most importantly, you can see it in a lot of the counter-market signals that are sent about what and how students study. It is very easy to underestimate the role of students in moulding ‘their’ higher education.

Figure 2: Percentage change in enrolments by subject area, 1996–7 to 2005–6



Source: Universities UK  
(from ‘Patterns of higher education institutions in the UK, eighth report.’)

This is seen most strongly in the choice of subjects, where the reports have underlined the difficulties providers have faced (more successfully in recent years) in adjusting to the popularity and unpopularity of certain courses. The 'media studies' vogue, in a deeply ironic way, was a demand-led phenomenon (it's ironic, because one of the chief charges is that higher education doesn't respond to demand). The decline in sciences (other than the biosciences) and technology may be irreversible (and we have shielded ourselves from its full effects in the UK because of overseas recruitment). Culture seems to be having an effect here too. A report from the Nuffield Foundation points to a negative correlation between objective 'development' and enthusiasm for science and technology (in other words, it isn't just a western disease).<sup>2</sup>

Student choice is also about mode of study, where the sectoral super-tanker has to deal with rapid growth in demand for part-time undergraduate and full-time postgraduate courses. It is about brands, where, for example, only in relation to the supply-led public and regulated services do Foundation Degrees seem to have high-volume future prospects.

Finally, it is about choice of institutions. 'Hard to reach' groups remain concentrated in one particular part of the sector (normally the former 'public sector' institutions that were polytechnics, large colleges under local authority control and Scottish Central Institutions). However, contrary to the propaganda of some groups (like the Sutton Trust, which campaigns to get well-qualified 'non-standard' students into a small group of 'top' universities, and which sees failure to do this as a 'waste of talent'), their choices are not necessarily irrational.<sup>3</sup> There may be economic, familial and cultural reasons for wanting to study closer to home. There may be courses on offer which are perceived to be more attractive (especially those that relate to health, service and cultural professions) and the teaching styles may be felt to be more appropriate in the so-called 'new' universities. To quote the Teaching and Learning Research Programme's project on the Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL), 'the amount of learning is not related to "quality" rankings of institutions (you won't necessarily learn more if you go to a posh place).'<sup>4</sup>

The third proposition is that, *as higher education expands* (especially as it approaches what Martin Trow called 'universal' levels – that is, with more than 50 per cent of each age cohort participating),<sup>5</sup> *the social impact will be as much on non-participants and their immediate family and social circles as on participants themselves*. This paradox is tied up in the concept (first articulated by AH Halsey) of higher education as a 'positional good'. However, as Gore Vidal said, there is a danger in emphasising positional goods: 'It's not enough to succeed. Others must fail.'

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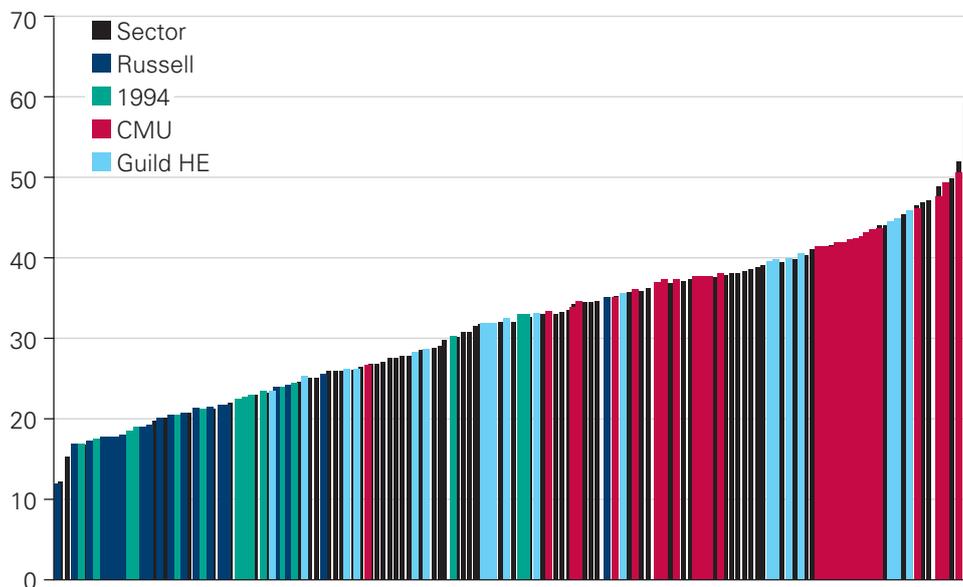
<sup>2</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Sutton Trust (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Brennan and Jary (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Trow (2005).

Figure 3: Percentage of young full-time first degree entrants from Socio-Economic Classification classes 4, 5, 6 and 7, 2005–6



Source: Based on Universities UK's 'Patterns of higher education institutions in the UK, eighth report'.

The really serious issue is about polarisation: the growing gap between those with access to this good, and those without. This leads to a famous paradox. For higher education to be 'fairer' it has to be allowed to expand, and as it expands it increases the gap between the life chances of those who participate and those who do not. We need to look at non-participation at least as much as participation, and about disengagement (and re-engagement) at least as much as recruitment and retention. It seems to be particularly difficult to grow working-class participation as a proportion, even though it may increase in absolute terms.

At the heart of the matter is the question of social mobility. Is HE participation essentially a shield against downward social mobility for dull middle-class children? The debate can all too easily descend into a competition between two narratives: one stressing the role of higher education in reproducing patterns of elite formation; the other more confident about the effect of expanded, more democratic systems in enabling new entrants. A fascinating new study by Gareth Williams and Ourania Filippakou shows how in the UK both narratives can simultaneously be true (*Higher Education and UK elite formation in the 20th Century*).<sup>6</sup> The lazy term of art is meritocracy. However, it is important to remember that the term 'meritocracy' was coined by Michael Young in 1958 as a warning – not as a goal to be achieved.<sup>7</sup> We need to get past the zero-sum assumption of the 'positional good' and ensure that wider participation benefits society as a whole.

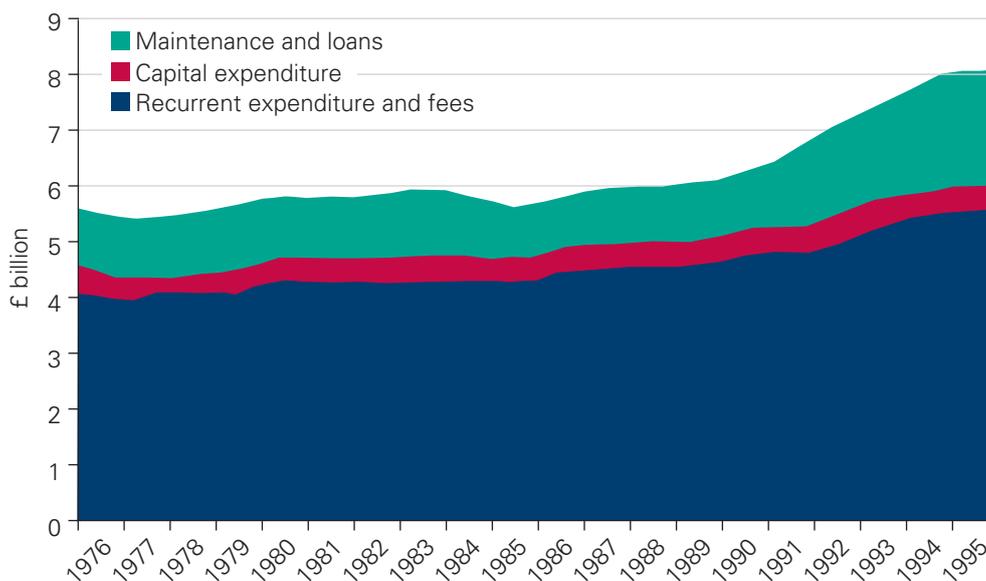
<sup>6</sup> Williams and Filippakou (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Young (1958).

The fourth proposition is that in order to fully understand the impact of public investment in higher education, we have to separate the issues of support for institutions and support for students. There is a British tendency to start talking about the first (how do we pay for what our universities need to do) and end up by talking almost exclusively about the second (how do students pay for course and living costs). The debate over the 2003 White Paper and 2004 Higher Education Act is a classic instance of this (look at the Hansard Record of the second reading and you will see exactly what I mean).

The Dearing Committee was able to make the case for a student contribution to the costs of their higher education on the grounds that the balance between public funding of the institutions and of students themselves had shifted radically over time in favour of the latter. The new arrangements set out from 1997 broadly addressed this question, although they brought other problems in their wake.

**Figure 4: Public expenditure on higher education in the UK (1995–96 prices)**



Notes: Includes current and capital grants, publicly funded tuition fees, funding from Research Council, expenditure on student maintenance grants and net expenditure on student loans.

Source: *Higher Education in the Learning Society (Dearing Report, 1997)*

The new arrangements for student support from 2006 have proved broadly progressive but will have significant effects on the long-term financing of the system as the proportional government contribution to students has actually increased, not least through the increased generosity of grants and interest free loans, as well as the up-front payment of fees. It is significantly because of these higher than anticipated costs that part-time students are still discriminated against in terms of access to bursaries, loans and the Graduate Contribution Scheme itself.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Callendar (forthcoming).

The fifth is about a failure by international standards, which undermines much of what I have called 'Lifelong learning friendliness'. *Our principal failure has been to make Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) work.*

In 2002–3, over 11,000 of the 300,000 students who entered HE institutions did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years. The vast majority of these students received no credit for their previous studies.

The flexibility which a proper credit framework brings will be needed all the more in the light of current economic turbulence and the effects this is having on employment. Large numbers of adults will be seeking to improve their qualifications without having to commit themselves to a long stretch of full-time education. This is not a technical issue: we have the systems. It is a cultural and moral issue: we fail to use these systems for reasons of conservatism, snobbery and lack of imagination.

The sixth takes us back to the IFLL: *universities contribute across the full range of desirable forms of capital* – human, social, identity, creative and 'mental' (as in the recent Government Office of Science Foresight exercise).

Globally, we are going through a neo-liberal phase at the moment where human capital and personal economic returns apparently rule: essentially 'learn to earn'. This certainly underwrites much of the dialogue about fees and sharing the costs of higher education with its eventual beneficiaries. However, there is another perspective. The Wider Benefits of Learning Group at the Institute of Education have demonstrated conclusively on the basis of serious longitudinal study (of cohorts born in 1958, 1970 and now 2000) that participants in higher education in the UK are likely to be happier, healthier and more democratically tolerant. Graduates are also capable of passing the benefit on (it's not rocket science – as the study of the Millennium cohort already shows: graduates read to their children). The worm in the apple is 'drop-out'. The UK system seems to give the lie to the American presumption that some HE is better than none: those who commence higher education and then drop out fall behind their peers who never started.<sup>9</sup>

The seventh proposition is similar. Across higher education internationally I see a revival of 'liberal' values in undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy. This means that higher education *is vital for many to the development of the 'capabilities' on which the central contributions of lifelong learning rest.*

This trend is encapsulated, for example, in some of the discussions of the Harvard 'core' in the US, of the 'Melbourne model' in Australia, and in the UK the Russell Group's discussion of what Malcolm Grant has called a 'balanced meal' in the undergraduate experience.

There are several sources of this revival and reinvention. It is based in the recognition that life and work in the twenty-first century requires *breadth* as well as *depth* of knowledge and skills. It revives a central Enlightenment idea, recently delicately

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<sup>9</sup> Feinstein *et al.* (2008).

probed by Richard Sennett in his sophisticated analysis of 'craft', as what he calls 'the unity of the head and the hand'.<sup>10</sup> Think about all of those twenty-first century professions that rely on both cognitive and affective learning. It is also about the '*ethical turn*' in public discourse, not least in response to prominent ethical shortcomings in business, professional and political life. It is connected to a *student-led redefinition of mutuality* that elevates environmental and international concerns above traditional political allegiances (the now outmoded proxies for 'engagement'). Look, for example, at the revival of student volunteering.

This is where citizenship comes in. My sense is that citizenship education has broadly got it wrong. A brittle, nationalistic, quite possibly politically slanted view of what it is to understand and project rights and responsibilities as a member of a democratic and inclusive society is unpersuasive to many of that society's members (particularly youth and minorities of various kinds). More seriously, it has been allowed to disguise a much more generous, contemporary and global sense of what it is to be a citizen. I call this alternative conception *soft citizenship*. The echo of other forms of currently approved 'softness' (like 'soft skills' and 'soft power') is deliberate.

Finally, on 'capabilities', there is a straightforward practical point. As initial HE systems grow to become 'universal' (with many societies with more than 50 per cent APR), second-cycle participation expands in its wake. The effect is to move aspects of *professional formation* from undergraduate to post-graduate levels, and hence to clear space for a more generous, liberal approach to initial HE.

The eighth of my propositions is analytical. *For many of these purposes, the 'institution' is not the most relevant unit of analysis.* Most of the key issues will only be addressed by the sector working together.

What lies behind much of the historical success of the UK sector is the concept of a *controlled reputational range*. It is important that institutions at each end of the reputational pecking-order can recognise each other, and have something tied up in each other's success. The self-appointed 'gangs' in the system (the Russell Group, the 94 Group, Million+, the 'Alliance' and Guild HE) don't help much in this respect. For them 'autonomy' is mostly bound up in getting a third party (the government) to restrict the freedom of manoeuvre of their rivals.

Another pathology is the distance preserved between higher and further education. Universities have always tended to use further education as a kind of header tank: a useful source of recruitment when needed; of displacement during periods of rapid expansion; and of collaboration on their own terms. This will not do in the future. Credit structures and progression will have to be much more transparent and user-friendly. Local 'adequacy' of provision of post-compulsory education – to borrow a term from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act – will have to be more regularly debated and implemented, and employers will need to be involved across the divide in a more constructive way.

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<sup>10</sup> Sennett (2008).

The ninth proposition is similar to the eighth: *nor is the nation-state* a sensible unit for many purposes. We have evidence that UK devolution, and even English regionalism, are acting against rather than with aspects of a student-led and employer-friendly lifelong learning system. We also need to recognise how our university and college campus are way ahead of our society as a whole in terms of being influenced by and responding to a global community. A majority of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) now have students from over 100 countries, and several have a majority of undergraduates who are bilingual. It is taking us a long time to catch up with this profound transformation of our community.

Meanwhile, national policy for higher education around the world has recently been overtaken by a bizarre obsession with very dubious measures of ‘world-classness’. In these and the surrounding dialogue what counts is research, media interest, graduate destinations, infrastructure and international ‘executive’ recruitment, but not much else. Many of the ‘common-sense’ elements of high performance by comprehensive universities – like teaching quality, widening participation and social mobility, services to business and the community, support of rural in addition to metropolitan communities, as well as contributions to other public services – are conspicuously absent.<sup>11</sup>

My tenth and final proposition is that in order to meet these challenges, *the institutions also need to show more imagination, in particular to use their autonomy better.*

UK HEIs are – by international comparison – extraordinarily autonomous; and we hold that autonomy at the institutional level (in contrast, autonomy – when it is held, as in some jurisdictions, at the faculty or local level – can restrict institutional freedom of action). However, we are very ambivalent about autonomy. We pay excessive lip-service to the idea, but we are also hooked on ear-marked funding. Lots of university leaders won’t do what they know they should unless and until there is a special fund to support it, and they stop as soon as the so-called ‘initiative’ ends. This can lead to a very curious inversion of institutional priorities. The thing that we assume to be most important becomes not the first but the last call on our institutional resources.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Watson (2007) 34–46.

<sup>12</sup> Watson (2008).

### Conclusion

The challenge to the IFLL Commission is to ensure that a high-performing and (by international standards) relatively under-resourced HE sector is part of the solution and not part of the problem of the framework of lifelong learning. I hope that the Commission will provide something of a wake-up call for higher education and those responsible for leading and supporting it. The policy-makers will need to recognise the need for a controlled range of diverse institutions, and the necessity of support across that range. They and the institutions will need to act to improve the position of part-time students, in all sorts of ways (financial, pedagogical and especially in terms of progression). We may need to rethink the pattern of student support and entitlement, possibly moving from the present Graduate Contribution Scheme to a 'national bursary.' Above all, we shall have to work together to deliver on the promise of credit, progression and re-engagement.

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