

Additionally, the newly created student loan scheme will make higher education accessible and affordable to students from lower social economic backgrounds. It offers students the opportunity to contribute and share part of the cost of their education. Unfortunately, the high interest rate is likely to put students into bankruptcy in a country faced with unbridled microeconomic instabilities. Also, while providing needs-based loans to students is an improvement over the previous loan scheme, the question remains how can one assess individuals' household income without reliable data? Moreover, awarding a scholarship to an "academically brilliant" student is a step in the right direction, but how do we ensure fairness in a country where a greater percentage of students are those whose parents can provide them with better pretertiary education in addition to supplementary instruction at home?

#### CONCLUSION

Despite these challenges, the GETFund is making significant contributions toward higher education development in Ghana in infrastructure, student development, faculty research, and staff support. In 2007 Parliament approved an estimated amount of 582 billion cedis (US\$63,210,571) by the GETFund to overhaul infrastructure and equipment at the higher education level. It has become one of the richest sources of funds complementing government's budgetary allocation to higher education. However, to sustain the fund for posterity, its sustainability needs to be ensured not only by maintaining transparency but also by providing a legislative instrument to increase the autonomy of the board and improve management efficiency. In summary, the GETFund has the potential for replication in other developing countries facing similar challenges. ■

## Higher Education under a Labour Government

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The Labour Party's victory in the general election of 1997, fueled by the slogan "Education, Education, Education," was greeted with a wave of popular enthusiasm. For higher education the financial stringencies imposed by the Tories were expected to be significantly alleviated. Labour inherited the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry

into Higher Education (the Dearing Report), which had been jointly commissioned by the two main political parties to keep higher education from becoming an election issue. These recommendations included a new deal on the financing of students—an issue at the heart of the report. Under the Tory period from 1979 to 1997, the unit of resource (i.e., government funding per student) had been reduced by 45 percent as student numbers rose but were funded at marginal cost only. The best that can be said after 10 years of Labour is that the government has stabilized state funding per student at the 1997 level. The expected uplift occurred only in the area of research; this policy has favored research-intensive universities over the rest. More seriously, the Dearing recommendations on student finance were not accepted, and thus a student fee was introduced. However, the benefit of what should have been an increase in university funding was transferred back to the government in a compensating lower recurrent grant.

Five years later the pressure on university finance forced the government to set up an in-house working party of ministers and civil servants—rather than the more ponderous national commission approach—which produced a white paper, *The Future of Higher Education*. This document was altogether more radical and controversial than the Dearing Report, proposing a much higher student fee (£3,000) coupled with income-based loans funded by the government. Coming at a time when the government was already under fire for its allegedly neoliberal approach to the management of its welfare state inheritance, the proposals aroused serious opposition from within its own party within the House of Commons and were only approved in a knife-edge vote by a majority of five. The concessions wrung by opponents included an agreement to review the level of fees in 2009/10 and the establishment of an Office for Fair Access to ensure that access was preserved and that universities committed enough of their increased fee income to bursaries for economically disadvantaged students. Applications for university places dipped slightly in 2005/06, the year before the introduction of the new fee structure but bounded back in the following year, seemingly justifying the government's approach, though the long-term impact of student debt on the economy still needs to be evaluated. The introduction of the new fee levels reinforced the marketization of UK higher education but also brought new and welcome funding into the system. This did not apply in Scotland, however, as the Scottish devolved government rejected fees to the consternation of most Scottish universities, which foresaw an alarming gap emerging between their funding and the rest of the UK university system.

#### WIDENING PARTICIPATION

From the beginning of its term, the new government sought to demonstrate its commitment to widening access to higher education. The prime minister publicly envisaged the age participation rate rising to 50 percent; in practice it remains stuck

at 43 percent in England, although the 50 percent figure has been reached in Scotland. A prime objective, following the Dearing Report, has been to encourage a larger proportionate across for lower socioeconomic groups. A major cause célèbre was created when the chancellor of the exchequer highlighted the case of a girl from a northern state comprehensive school who had excellent qualifications being turned down by Oxford but accepted and given a scholarship by Harvard. (It was later established that the Oxford college that rejected her had a good record of accepting candidates from state schools and that the decision was simply a reflection of the severe competition for places.) Complex league tables were produced to indicate the expected levels of lower socioeconomic students' enrollment in individual university intakes, and funding levels were adjusted to provide an incentive for widening participation.

This approach has had little effect, however. There is no evidence of discrimination in university selection procedures, and it is beginning to be recognized that the problem lies in the schools and in the wider economic and social policies pursued by this and previous governments. One-third of children are born into families whose earnings fall below the poverty line, and the Rowntree Trust has shown that children from poor homes are a year behind their peers when they begin school

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and two years behind at age 14. In 2000 the secretary of state launched a new initiative for the award of two-year "foundation" degrees aimed at improving the skills base. The proposal has only produced modest numbers, and the decision in 2006 to offer further education colleges (nonuniversity postsecondary institutions) the power to award the foundation degree without reference to universities is likely to depress its status further.

#### STRETCHING THE SYSTEM

Perhaps the most surprising result of the Labour government's policies has been the widening gap between the "best" (a word incautiously used in the white paper) universities and the former polytechnics that were given university status in 1992. Adherents of the Dearing Committee's proposals believed they were advocating a "compact" between the higher education system and the government under which the concession of more accountability and the system's pursuit of a social agenda was the quid pro quo for a stable funding regime and the maintenance of institutional autonomy. Whatever private assurances were given, the government, once in office, has not seen it this way. By 2003 when the white paper was published, the government had become convinced of the need for "world-

class" universities rather than a world-class system and, against the advice of the Funding Council, initiated an intensification of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In addition, the government has invested considerably in research and research infrastructure. Both actions benefited the most-research-intensive universities at the expense of a layer of research-active universities (the so-called "squeezed middle") and, of course, of the new universities. The white paper canvassed the idea of "teaching only" universities, and a number of higher education colleges that previously lacked degree-awarding powers have now been upgraded to university status. The result is a system much more polarized than before, with the exponentially growing gap between the most successful of the Russell Group (the self-selected club of research universities) and the stragglers in the Coalition of Modern Universities (which comprises most of the former polytechnics), in terms of research excellence, academic quality of intake, and financial sustainability. This leaves the lower-ranked institutions that have a high dependence on "access students" impoverished and at some financial risk from fluctuations in the student market. Whereas many of the most research-intensive universities have reduced their dependence on the Funding Council to below 30 percent, some of the newer universities are dependent on them to the tune of 70 to 80 percent.

#### GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONISM

If one leg of the so-called Dearing compact was funding, the other was autonomy, and here there are signs that the UK tradition of a hands-off relationship with government is fraying at the edges. The Funding Council claims continuity with the old University Grants Committee in acting as a "buffer," but increasingly it is being marginalized on larger issues. The decision to create foundation degrees and later to give degree-awarding powers to further education colleges, and the intensification of the RAE, referred to above, are examples of ministerial fiat. The proposed revision of the RAE from a peer-reviewed to a metrics-measured system was announced by the chancellor of the exchequer, suggesting that the Department of Education and Skills itself, let alone the Funding Council, was in control of the agenda. When in 2007 the department was split and a new Department of Innovation, Universities and Science was created, it might have been hoped that the new secretary of state would adopt an advocacy role for higher education. However, his early arbitrary decision to stop the funding of students taking a second first degree, an important function for an institution like the Open University, suggests that the new department will marginalize the Funding Council yet further. The new president of Universities UK—the representative body of UK universities—Professor Trainer, an American, is quoted as saying that "In my native country, the USA, even in the state universities there is nothing like the degree of intervention in institutional management and the working life of academics that we still experience in this country." It is worth adding that the single most dramatic ministe-

rial intervention, the creation of the e-university, widely hyped as a farsighted initiative, collapsed under a mountain of debt some four years later.

### CONCLUSION

There is, of course, another side to the story. Internationally, the higher education system is highly successful: international student numbers have risen by more than a third since 1997, and the United Kingdom remains in spite of competition the second most popular destination after the United States for international students; in research, the United Kingdom's share of world citations also places it second only to the United States; Cambridge, Oxford, and Imperial College are to be found in the top 10 in world-ranking systems; within Europe, the United Kingdom collaborates more than any other country with China. Perhaps more significant, the newly introduced national Student Satisfaction Survey shows UK students to be overwhelmingly satisfied with the education they are receiving. How far this performance reflects historic or inherent strengths, rather than any actions by government in the last 10 to 15 years, is hard to assess, but it is certainly true that within European higher education the United Kingdom is now seen as a sometimes uncomfortable trendsetter. Perhaps the most striking feature of any account of UK government policy toward higher education is the extent it represents a continuation and extension of policies initiated by its predecessor government's last decade. While there are danger signs in unwise ministerial interventionism, as a consequence of its size, its cost, and its economic importance higher education has become a legitimate object of public policy in a way that was barely conceivable two decades ago. Inevitably there is disappointment with a government that seemed to promise so much, but perhaps higher education should congratulate itself that the results have been no worse. ■

## European Students in the Bologna Process

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The task of establishing a European higher education area, the so-called Bologna process, has led to massive systemic changes in European higher education and has also dramatically altered the dynamics of European higher education poli-

cymaking and, especially, the role and influence of various interest organizations. The student constituency across Europe has been widely supportive of the process and vocal in demanding Bologna reforms to be implemented at their respective higher education institutions. One of the student organizations in Europe has played a particularly visible role in the Bologna process. ESIB (the National Unions of Students in Europe), which has been renamed ESU (European Students' Union [www.esib.org]), has taken active part in the Bologna process, ensuring that student interests were reflected in its policies. At the same time, ESU used the process to upgrade its visibility and role in European higher education policymaking in general.

### THE EUROPEAN STUDENT CONSTITUENCY AND THE EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION

The student constituency active on the European level can be categorized in three main groups of student organizations: *discipline-based* (e.g., AIESEC [Association of Economics and Business students] and ELSA [European Law Students Association]); *political and religious* (e.g., EDS [European Democrat Students] and JECI-MIEC [International Young Catholic Students-International Movement of Catholic Students]); and *interdisciplinary organizations* (e.g., Erasmus Student Network [network of students taking part in Erasmus

*Since its creation in 1982, ESU massively expanded its membership and today acts on behalf of 45 National Unions of Students from 34 countries.*

Program exchanges), AEGEE [Association des Etats Généraux des Etudiants de l'Europe, which promotes European cooperation among students], and ESU). Most of these student organizations are members of the European Youth Forum (www.youthforum.org), the European platform of national youth councils and European nongovernmental youth organizations, and a prominent player in European youth policymaking.

Only ESU represents democratic and independent student organizations that are elected as the national platforms in their countries. Since its creation in 1982, ESU massively expanded its membership and today acts on behalf of 45 National Unions of Students from 34 countries, representing over 10 million students in Europe. ESU's main decision-making body is the board, which consists of representatives of national unions and meets twice yearly to decide on all policy and internal issues. While ESU has links to representatives of other student organizations, there is no formal channel of cooperation.

### STUDENTS' INTERESTS IN THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

While students were not formally included in drafting of the