

University funding



Higher education is once again rising to the top of the political agenda, despite the considerable efforts of the present Government to address some of the resourcing problems facing UK universities. The previous government dealt with the escalating resource crisis by effectively kicking the ball into touch before the last General Election through the establishment of the Dearing Enquiry into Higher Education. In the aftermath of Dearing some of the sector's problems have been resolved but the resourcing problem has refused to go away, not least because higher education has been transformed from an elite system into a mass system of education. Current government policy envisages that up to 50 per cent of the population will engage with higher education, without any sacrifice in the quality of the education delivered, whilst the unit of resource available to universities continues to diminish.

Industry groups, political parties, government and universities themselves are currently examining funding options which could deliver quality higher education, both teaching and research; tackle the problem of widening access

whilst achieving the diversity of provision that will more closely match the needs of our society; and do all of this whilst helping the UK retain or, more correctly, regain its position as a world-leading provider of higher education. These are major issues on which The Royal Academy of Engineering should have a view, not least because practically all of our future engineers are likely to come through the University system and much of the fundamental and applied research related to engineering is carried out within those institutions.

The recent announcement of the Conservative Party that their proposed privatisation of universities will release

them from Government interference and allow them to attain world-class status would, at first sight, appear to be a very attractive solution for universities feeling weighed down by ever reducing units of resource and accustomed to chasing, in competition with all other universities, every penny of hypothecated 'new' money supporting policies of the Government of the day. Indeed it may well be a genuinely attractive solution for a small number of universities who are already relatively well endowed and with a degree of excellence shared across their disciplines, such as Oxbridge or some others of the 'golden triangle', provided the Government endowment is

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sufficient for the purpose. Even then, to catch up on the enormously well-endowed top universities in the USA, it is unlikely that the Government purse would be large enough to privatise more than a handful of UK universities.

The option of allowing universities to charge top-up fees, despite the Government's present policy of opposing any such move, is the one favoured by several universities. Some leading universities could charge top-up fees across the complete range of disciplines but the majority could only charge them in areas where they had a genuine competitive edge within certain market niches; and, for some universities, it would not be possible to take advantage of such a scheme. Scholarships and schemes to encourage wider access to Universities than has been achieved heretofore would be a sine qua non of

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Government policy if some relaxation of their policy on top-up fees were to be allowed.

These scenarios or others which are combinations of both would precipitate a major shake-up of the University system as a whole and, whilst driving diversity, could put certain universities and some disciplines at risk in the more 'free-market' environment which would

prevail. Some preliminary thought has already been given to these issues within The Academy but a more widespread debate is needed to shape The Academy's views on such an important national issue. In particular we should be ready to make our voice heard on the way engineering might best be positioned within the new order. ■

