



## **Response from the Academy of Social Sciences to the White Paper on the Future of Higher Education April 2003**

### **Preamble**

1. The Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences (AcSS) welcomes the White Paper on *The future of higher education* (Cm 5735, January 2003), together with the accompanying funding letter (22 January 2003), and the recent publication *Widening participation in higher education* (April 8<sup>th</sup> 2003/DfES/0301/2003) as they are important policy proposals on the future of higher education. The documents address values and issues about social justice and a democratic society and how higher education can contribute to these in ways that we believe to be important.

2. However, we as social scientists would welcome the opportunity to contribute more to the policy development process as the proposals are firmed up into policies. We believe that the evidence-base for many aspects of the proposals has not been adequately interrogated to show the complexities for higher education in the social sciences in the future.

3. In particular, we wish to comment upon four aspects of the proposals. We do not think that the proposals deal persuasively or sufficiently well with the complexities of the relationships between the underlying values and how they are to be implemented with respect to the evidence on these sets of issue. These are:

- **Size, Diversity and Dispersal** in the social sciences sector
- **Research** and the various definitions that might be applied
- **Teaching** and the relations with forms of research and learning
- **Students** and the lack of attention to the implications for postgraduates and academic staff as public sector workers in the future.

## **VALUES & THE NEED FOR REFORM:**

4. We argue above all that there is an uneasy relationship throughout the documents and the proposals between the values that underpin the arguments and the practical measures proposed for implementation. Indeed, there are contradictory values expressed throughout the documents and, moreover, contradictions between some values and the measures to achieve reform.

5. The values of social justice and democracy are frequently re-iterated. We agree wholeheartedly that these values should be guide policy. However, we note the individualism implicit in the assertion that higher education is important for graduates in terms of 'personal and intellectual fulfilment' (White Paper 2003 p.10), rather than in terms of social justice or its social usefulness and contribution to a democratic society.

6. The mechanisms for achieving these contradictory values, such as increasing competition between institutions and individuals, may militate against the achievement of social justice. Similarly, reliance on market forms of reform, including business measures and private finance initiatives may detract from forms of social justice and increase rather than decrease forms of social, economic or educational equalities between institutions and/or individuals.

7. The case for reform is asserted in terms of both values and the potential dangers of decline in forms of economic competitiveness and the potential lack of funding. This case is not made at all persuasively, since the key argument given is about how well the UK has done by comparison with other countries, particularly in terms of research. Indeed, we are shown to be second only to the USA in terms of 'world citations of scientific publications per country, 1981 – 2000' (ibid p. 2). If social scientific research publications had been included in the citation measures, these would have served to confirm how competitive we are as a country or nation, and how the social sciences make a significant contribution to this measure. The Commission on the Social Sciences (CSS) shows in its recent report (March 2003 p. 5 and p.8 paragraph 3) that 'by all available measures, British research in the social sciences is ranked second only to the USA' (ibid. p.5).

8. However, the white paper provides only a narrow overview and comparison of the UK with the USA. Neither Australasia nor Europe is mentioned at all in the documents. Indeed, this is a major oversight given that the European Union set the Bologna process for higher education in train in 1997 and has developed many approaches to the harmonisation of degrees and postgraduate research. Most importantly, it has begun the process of developing collaborative schemes through the concept of the European Research Area.

9. There are clear contradictions between the values and the need for reform in terms of the potential future lack of funding. Indeed, many of the measures suggested may exacerbate rather than reduce the potential problems. Moreover, there are contradictions in the units of comparison and evidence. Here in the white paper the UK is used, but most of the reforms are for England only since devolution has wrought changes in higher education. Indeed, the CSS demonstrates the richness and diversity of the social sciences, and its importance for devolved government: 'Devolution has already had profound effects on the way in which the social sciences are perceived, exploited and funded by government in different parts of the UK (CSS p.43). Scotland has had an independent system of education, including higher education for many years; Wales and Northern Ireland are also able to consider these proposals separately now.

## **Size, Diversity and Dispersal**

10. The social sciences have developed in the last forty years into a large, diverse and socially relevant research sector. Unlike the natural and physical sciences, most social science research does not require extensive equipment and complex and costly research facilities, although it does need continuity of resources. Accordingly, small centres of excellence and international scholars of the highest calibre are found across the sector and in all regions, in departments both small and large. Consequently, concepts like critical mass and concentration of research need to be applied very differently (if at all) and on a much smaller scale. The higher education funding model should reflect this reality, and the assumptions adjusted to fit the characteristics of the sector. This will secure the international strength and competitiveness of this sector, rather than disrupt it and diminish its effectiveness and performance.

11. Social sciences are very popular with students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and with overseas students. This sector has already played an important role in the expansion of student numbers. Applications data show that students are much more attracted to departments with good research and teaching records, and where the presence of the outstanding lone scholar is still relevant. Since the quality of social science teaching is high in all regions, students are currently able to have access to world class higher education in the social sciences without having to compete to join just a few institutions.

12. These research and teaching factors underscore the need to maintain the diversity and regional dispersal of the social sciences. Concentrating social science research into a few universities would result in a once-for-all reduction in overall research capacity, in an area that is known to be world class. A few centres could never accommodate the current range of expertise, let alone promote new areas of excellence and maintain socially useful work that may only sporadically and always unpredictably be in high demand, especially in the policy field.

13. Concentration of research will have a negative impact on social science education, since the capacity to deliver world class teaching will decline if the current proposals are implemented, and will only be available on an increasingly competitive basis. We would argue that the need for social science education is increasing, as scientific and technological developments both planned and unplanned pose significant problems for social and political understanding. This development threatens as well to work against the widening participation objectives, and undermine the development of the regions, all of which can currently boast about hosting at least one area of social science excellence in their region.

## **Research**

14. The definition of research implicit in the white paper relates quite well to funded research in the natural and physical sciences – where ‘big scientific projects’ are typical – but this definition is very unsuitable for the social sciences and humanities. It is not the definition that underpinned the Research Assessment Exercises, where research was defined more eclectically and did not rely on a single notion of large teams conducting only ‘blue skies’ research requiring large-scale expensive technical equipment. More robust and relevant definitions of research for the social sciences would include notions of applied, business- and policy-oriented, and vocational research as well as scholarly activities. These may necessitate collaboration both for research *and* teaching purposes.

15. The proposals for research concentration and the 'creation' of research-intensive institutions go against the traditional definition of a university as a place for the scholarly pursuit of knowledge and learning. These proposals are not particularly useful from the point of view of the social sciences, since the criteria for research excellence in the social sciences are more about social and policy relevance and appropriateness than about size (CSS, 2003, chapter 5). In addition, the very wide-ranging proposals for diversity in approaches to knowledge transfer, knowledge exchanges and innovation across business, voluntary organisations and government in chapter 3 of the white paper are welcome but contradictory approaches to research as specified by the definition of research in chapter 2 of the white paper. These research perspectives accord well with those already being pursued extremely effectively in the social sciences. (CSS, 2003, chapter 5 '*The health and value of British social sciences*')

16. Moreover, the relationship between research and teaching (of both undergraduates and postgraduates, including research students) is symbiotic and necessary in the social sciences as our reading of the research evidence demonstrates. The research provided in chapter 4 of the white paper as evidence of the lack of necessary relation between teaching and research (footnote 26 on page 54) draws an erroneous conclusion but one with major policy significance, namely the creation of two different sorts of university. The Hattie and Marsh (1996) review of educational research concluded that greater collaboration between research and teaching would enhance both in higher education. Thus the bases for the arguments for the separation of research intensive and 'teaching intensive' institutions are not based upon a sound review of the best available educational research evidence.

17. In addition, the future of higher education as developed through and by postgraduate research students, attracting international students as researchers, new subject areas and generally the future of academics as a profession would be seriously jeopardised by these kinds of proposals which go against traditional notions of the university. However, we do support the government's argument for further research infrastructure investment. We welcome the proposal for more investment in researchers as a career route although this cannot be achieved if support is not maintained for small departments or lone researchers (viz paragraph 2.32).

18. We note that the government has paid no attention in this white paper to issues that are central to the growth and development of the social sciences as well as the natural sciences, namely issues around research governance and ethics.

## **Teaching**

19. We welcome the value and emphasis put on teaching in the white paper, especially as elucidated in chapter 4. However, we do not wish to see the creation of two different kinds of university from the point of view of the social sciences. In research intensive institutions teaching would not be valued, and in 'teaching intensive institutions' research would similarly not be valued. Removing Research Degree awarding powers for the definition of these universities would signal a lack of emphasis on the importance of the necessary relation between teaching and research in the social sciences.

20. The 'teaching intensive institutions' appear to be redolent of the 'bog-standard' comprehensive schools that the government has sought to avoid. Yet the emphasis in the white paper on various quality standards for teaching *inter alia* through the centres of teaching excellence as 'beacon institutions' and moves to

transform the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education to a Teaching Quality Academy enhances this impression. The sheer range of initiatives for teaching is at the expense of learning in higher education, a concept which appears to have been avoided in the white paper.

21. The reference however to a new complaints procedure for students is a welcome proposal. We would like consideration given to the idea of an Ombudsman for universities to cover a wider range of complaints than those of students, and to include consideration of university teachers and researchers.

22. The proposals for a likely new pay structure for academic staff, modelled upon the schemes of Performance-related pay and performance management for schools, are not welcome. They would not contribute to improvements in academic developments, teaching, learning and research but would erode the excellent work that has been undertaken by academic social scientists over the last decade or more (CSS, chapters 6 and 9). We would like consideration to be given to university teachers as public sector workers, on the same basis as the arguments for health professionals and teachers.

23. There is no reference to the importance of postgraduate studies in these institutions and yet postgraduate students now account for over 30 percent of the student body in higher education in Britain (CSS, Table 10.6 p. 130). From the point of view of the social sciences postgraduate studies are an important and necessary component of higher education and contribute to the health and vitality of learning, teaching and research nationally, regionally and locally. Most importantly, they contribute to the renewal and replacement of future generations of academics in the social sciences.

## **Students**

24. The aim to increase participation in higher education to 50 percent by 2010 and at the same time to reduce the social class gaps in participation is extremely laudable. However, the mechanisms proposed to achieve these twin aims will militate against the achievement in the reduction in the social class participation rates in different forms of higher education. Indeed, the evidence-base for the social class gaps is drawn from the social sciences and it is clear that the proposals will lead to different kinds of higher education for different social classes and groups.

25. Indeed, the proposals clearly show that all future expansion to ensure the fifty- percent participation rate will be concentrated in further education colleges providing two-year foundation degrees. However, it is not clear whether these institutions would be given the freedom to charge top-up fees or provide the same basis for fair access for their students.

26. The proposals for a new Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to deal with issues about the four As – Attainment, Aspiration and Application and Admissions – are very limited in dealing with persistent differences in the relations between educational achievements and social class backgrounds. They relate to only a limited group of higher education institutions – namely the research-intensive - and do not cover the full implications of new funding regimes. They will not fully address the question of participation of students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the constraints imposed upon them in participating in higher education.

27. The arguments about the new funding mechanisms for higher education through freedoms for universities have been well rehearsed elsewhere. However, it is

important to point out that the creation of at least two kinds of university will not allow for 'fair access' for postgraduate students nor for academics to participate in research across the range of new institutions.

28. As it stands, the new funding regimes proposed will, in general, militate against rather than operationalise the values and principles upon which the white paper is based. Moreover, social scientific evidence about the social sciences as a world class, internationally competitive, highly productive and income-generating sector shows that the strengths of this diverse sector will be seriously damaged unless the model recognises its distinctive features.