Alan Milburn's report represents an opportunity for the university sector to rethink and re-imagine the mission of public universities

Alan Milburn's report on Higher Education did not receive the attention Anna Zimdars suggests it deserved. In this post she offers an overview of the report and an initial analysis of its key claims. Among other pertinent aspects, it places the long neglected issue of postgraduate education at the heart of the widening participation agenda. The report challenges those within higher education to rethink the purpose of the public university.

The 18th of October saw the publication of Alan Milburn's report on Higher Education, *"University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility"*. This is an important report and I was somewhat disappointed to see it was not the overarching daily top news story despite the good coverage on the Today programme. I certainly have not been so excited about reading something for a long time – move over, Harry Potter and Twilight.

My own research has concerned admission to the University of Oxford and to the English legal Bar. Against this background, I find much to like in Alan Milburn's welcome report on university and social mobility. My three report favourites are:

1)   endorsement of contextual data in undergraduate admission.

2)   emphasis on postgraduate study

3)   reference to regional variations in higher education participation as an area for public policy.

It seems to be the right thing to consider evidence-based information about students' educational context when universities make offers to applicants. Of course, using contextual data requires robust and valid empirical analyses, and the report recognizes this – another welcome emphasis and good news for social researchers: there is a need to provide a much thicker evidence base for a lot of current policy work in higher education e.g. university outreach initiatives. Might we see the creation of some new jobs in social research or in institutional research? Or is this unfounded optimism?

The detailed report then shows how the rationale or philosophy of entire admissions systems can differ (Chapter 5). Drawing on US research, the report considers how US Ivy league universities embrace the diversity of their student body as a legitimate objective of the learning and student experience they provide, drawing on the work of Harry Brighouse & Adam Swift and Tom Espenshade. I would have thought that although the US Ivies are private institutions – which contrasts with the status of the UK Russell Group – there is no reason in principle why we could not endorse diversity as an educational objective this side of the Atlantic alongside the use of contextual data. This makes sense for the education experience of students as well as for society (see also Nussbaum). In fact, just this week I asked my new tutees how they had enjoyed their first seminar this year. And, what was the most fun? The 'variety of experiences of participants' and 'hearing different points of view'. This allows for reflection that aside from the necessary government emphasis on the labour market returns to education, isn't it priceless to offer an educational experience which can transform an individual's way of viewing the world? It might seem like a romantic view of education but the business case for diversity is also well developed.

A seminal piece of research which, unfortunately, did not feature in this report, has attempted to capture the social utility of diversity as an admissions criterion and concluded that embracing diversity led to a wide array of social benefits (William Bowen and Derek Bok, 1999: The shape of the river). I would have

thus welcomed an even more radical endorsement of diversity in this report. However for the real policy world of admission, focusing on contextual data and accreditation of prior learning might be a more feasible starting point and is welcome.

Secondly, I am thrilled to see that postgraduate education is moving towards centre-stage in the report. With undergraduate degrees now often being 'necessary but insufficient' conditions for certain career entries, the focus on the interaction of postgraduate study with social background is most welcome – indeed a 'lack of access to postgraduate study is in danger of becoming a social mobility time bomb' (p. 6).

One of the theoretical issues surrounding postgraduate education implicitly shining through in the report, concerns the unresolved question whether educational opportunities are 'spilling over' or 'deferred selection' takes place. In other words, as we aim towards greater inclusion in undergraduate education, the benign hope is that any increase in opportunities will simply spill over into a more diverse student body at postgraduate level. In this model, graduates then also enjoy the same labour market outcomes regardless of background as their meritocratic credentials spill over into the labour market.

A more malign interpretation is that an era of credential inflation, heightened by a recession, could lead to deferred selection taking place and that all the sorts of things policy interventions attempt to neutralize – like ability to pay and other factors beyond individuals' control – matter again for postgraduate entry and entry to certain professions. Milburn highlighted some of these aspects in his Access to Professions report with regards to the role of unpaid internships in accessing some professions. This is an area where there is a need for empirical researchers and theorists to continue developing our understanding and communicating our findings with policy audiences.

Geography is another area where awareness of differences in university access can be a useful step towards redressing them – ideally when combined with developments in technology enhanced learning.

This segue ways into considering the figurative dog that is not barking – or not loud enough – in my view: disability and universality.

Well-designed technology-enhanced learning can benefit learners in different ways, but it can be exceptionally useful for students with disabilities. This is as long as accessibility considerations are an integral part of digital provision. A university-led discourse of diversity and inclusion and an expansion of the implicit notion of the normal students would be welcomed.

Universality covers two aspects: access to universally good schools and universal links between universities and schools. I was pleased to see the first point addressed in the report by stating that 'in an ideal world, all schools would be of a uniformly high standard and universities could simply select students on the basic of actual academic achievement'…and that 'sadly, this is not the case.' (p. 49) I think it is crucial to remember that making allowances for imperfect educational contexts is the tree. Good education for all is the wood sometimes missed because of all the trees. Indeed, the UK evidence-base showing support for universally good schools as preferable to a choice plethora of schools with too divergent educational experiences is growing.

Secondly, universality requires consideration when rolling out outreach schemes. Many schemes are due to the nature of the targeted mentoring small scale. But it would seem undesirable to introduce a new dimension of 'inequality of opportunity to outreach opportunities' to the list of inequalities students can encounter.

To conclude, Alan Milburn asks the university sector to step up and take greater responsibility for aspects of social mobility through education. This is an opportunity for the university sector to take on a leadership role and to rethink and re-imagine aspects of the mission of public universities.

About the author

Anna Zimdars is a lecturer at King's College London with an interest in university access, access to professions, and social mobility. Her 2011 conference on

university admissions, organized with Julian Skyrme, as well as her research on admission to the University of Oxford, were referenced several times in the Milburn report. Anna has spent research time at New York and Harvard universities and is interested in international collaborations as well as public engagement.

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