

Will David Willetts be remembered for progressive push for Open Access or pernicious effects of neoliberal academy?

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Now that the cabinet reshuffle news has settled and Greg Clark MP, the new Minister for Universities, Science, and Cities has begun his tenure, we asked for further reflections on the positions taken by previous minister David Willetts. [David Prosser](#) covers the dramatic influence Willetts had on open access legislation and momentum in the UK. [Lee Jones](#) instead emphasises the escalation of marketisation in higher education and the damaging consequences of market-driven intensification for teaching and research activities.



David Prosser is Executive Director of [Research Libraries UK](#), supporting research libraries across the UK and Ireland.

Last November I was part of a small group waiting at Berlin airport to fly home from the latest in the Berlin series of [conferences on open access](#). David Willetts had spoken at the meeting and we spotted him across the departure lounge – he was obviously on the same flight home. Unbidden, he wandered over to us and started chatting about about OA policy. We were struck by his level of knowledge and his willingness to engage – he could easily have buried his head in his papers, but his preference was to continue the debate.



Mr Willetts' appointment as Minister for Universities and Science signalled a significant political shift in interest in issues of scholarly communication. From the start, Mr Willetts drew on his experiences as an independent scholar, often telling the story of how in opposition he couldn't get access to the latest research while writing his book, [The Pinch](#). Open access was clearly more than an abstract issue of library funding, but an enabling strategy that could unlock innovation and knowledge transfer, making the most of the UK's investment in publicly funded research.

It was this personal enthusiasm that led to the publication of the [Finch Report](#). Many OA advocates (myself included) believe that the Finch Report unnecessarily down-played the green route to OA and unhelpfully suggested – without offering any real evidence – that green embargos should be set to 12 months. The Government's acceptance of the Finch Report in full resulted in difficulties for RCUK, whose policy had shorter embargos. This led to a complication of the RCUK policy, in which longer embargoes would be in place during a transition phase, and the shift from what had been relatively straight-forward to a policy that needed the [famous decision tree](#) to make sense of it. We must hope that the current independent review of the RCUK policy will recommend the restoration of some of the original clarity.

Mr Willetts was clear, in [his letter to Dame Janet Finch](#) on the first anniversary of the Report that a transition to gold OA should not be seen as a license to print money and that the UK community would expect to see arrangements to offset 'double-dipping' (charging for OA and subscriptions for the same content) at the institutional level. This is something that [RLUK has strongly advocated](#) and we are now seeing positive responses from publishers. Mr Willetts never shied away from giving unpalatable messages to the publishing community. Never more so than a speech in 2012 to the Publishers Association in which he made it clear that [open access was inevitable](#) and there could be no business as usual.

In David Willetts we have had a thoughtful Minister who obviously cared about the issues of scholarly communications and the long-term management of research data. Some of us may have quibbles about details of the implication of specific policies, but none can doubt that those policies came from a considered evaluation of

evidence, a willing engagement with all the stake holders and a fundamental belief that publicly-funded research should be publicly accessible. We can only hope that the moment that Mr Willetts has given to Open Access in the UK is continued and the combination of policies from the research and higher education funders moves us further towards a totally open future.

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David Willetts will be remembered, amongst other things, as the higher education minister who [failed to pass a higher education bill](#). Rather than democratically enacting changes to the higher education system, Willetts forced through a raft of changes that significantly escalated the marketisation of the university sector through administrative fiat. In so doing, he achieved many of the changes that a bill would have sought, including the [licensing of private providers as universities](#). Judging by the [record of such providers in the United States](#), this will have very negative long-term repercussions. Nonetheless, the absence of a proper bill has created massive confusion and uncertainty in the sector, leading to large year-on-year fluctuations in student numbers and university income, making it virtually impossible to conduct long-range rational planning.

The intensification of markets dynamics in higher education has also drawn resources away from research and teaching, sucking them into wasteful activities like [marketing](#), the preparation of “key information sets”, and other parasitic middle management pastimes. We also seen the beginnings of what a fully functioning market in higher education will bring: vicious attacks on weaker universities, like [London Met](#), the closure of [several “uncompetitive” departments](#), with many others [at risk](#), widespread [course closures](#) and [staff redundancies](#), and the expansion of elite institutions at the expense of their counterparts, [or even their own staff](#). Ironically though, and in line with other marketising initiatives in the UK, these moves have come with intensified regulation of universities, such that we labour under an even heavier regulatory burden than before – the worst of both possible worlds.

Thus, Willetts entirely failed to defend the sector from idiotic right-wing targets on immigration, which [extended to our international students](#), thereby damaging one of the few truly world-class “business sectors” left in Britain, while universities are also subject to a raft of new reporting requirements, with the establishment of new quangos like the Office of Fair Access. Under Willetts, students were explicitly encouraged to think of education purely in terms of personal gain and positioning themselves in the job market, and to think of universities and academics merely as service providers, fomenting a culture of demands for spoon feeding and complaints. Accordingly, student complaints have risen to unprecedented levels, which Willetts [actively welcomed](#). Rather than ushering in a brave new world, David Willetts will be remembered for presiding over an utter debacle: a quasi-marketised mess, funded by a grotesquely unfair fees and loans regime that not only imposes a massive burden on students but actually [worsens the state’s fiscal position](#). Sadly, the reshuffle is unlikely to make the slightest difference to this trajectory. The neoliberal ideology underpinning the aforementioned changes is deeply entrenched not just within the Conservative party led government, but throughout the political establishment. Even if fees are lowered to £6,000 after the next election, as the Labour Party has pledged, there is unlikely to be any full-scale retreat from the use of market mechanisms, and their pernicious consequences.

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