

# **Browne Report + the White Paper = A Murky Outlook for Educational Equality**

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*This policy report covers official UK Government policy over the last four months. Our brief is primarily to focus on the UK government's policy developments. However, the four countries that make up the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) are influenced by policy in different ways. For example, education policy made for England and Wales regarding schools and higher education has no direct influence in Scotland. However such policies may have indirect consequences especially for the relationships between the four countries and the differential provisions for schools and universities that apply.*

*We focus in particular in this report on two policy documents: a White Paper for schools entitled *The Importance of Teaching* published in November and the Browne report entitled *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* published in October. Both are currently being enacted. The White Paper outlines extensive changes in schooling and teacher training while the Browne Report focuses on the restructuring of higher education and changing in its funding, including raising student tuition fees. The key policy measures and proposals will have major implications for gender in education across all levels. The policy measures taken, will extend and increase neo-liberal individualism, and thus are likely to increase inequalities between men and women, on grounds of social class (or socio-economic status (SES), disadvantage or poverty), ethnicity/race, age and disabilities. These inequalities will be threaded through all levels of schooling and higher education, so that the chances of girls and women will be seriously constrained. In schools, girls' lives will be seriously limited, especially those from disadvantaged or poor families, and from ethnic or racial minorities. In higher education, the implementation of the changes will increase the stratification of universities, and with it, the opportunities for women from working class, poor or first in the*

*family to university, backgrounds to continue with their studies as either undergraduates or postgraduates. This report is based on a descriptive, rather than theoretical analysis, although arguments draw on theories of intersectionality of age, class, gender, sexuality, race and culture as continuing axes of disadvantage, privilege and marginalisation which underpin our approach to these questions.*

## **Introduction**

The last three months (September, October and November 2010) have witnessed an avalanche of changes in policies and practices by the UK Government, all impacting upon girls and women in education across all levels, family and work. In this report we concentrate upon the key changes outlined for schools and higher education in two policy documents: (1) the White Paper for schools entitled *The Importance of Teaching* published in November and (2) the Browne Report entitled 'An Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finances', subtitle *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* published in October. Both are currently being enacted. On December 9<sup>th</sup> the Government initiated a debate in the House of Commons on implementing the proposed rise in tuition fees to £9,000 p.a. for higher education and on December 16<sup>th</sup> the House of Lords approved the decision to raise the fee level to £9,000 p.a. from 2012-13. The cuts in HE funding for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in universities have also been announced to take effect from 2011-2012. At the time of writing the White Paper is being transformed into an Education Bill to be enacted early in 2011.

As Jessica puts it, if we mix together brown(e) and white (paper) we get a *murky experience!* The future for girls and women in education, family and work is unclear, as are the educational trajectories of economically and racially/culturally marginalised groups in the UK. Perhaps the future is so bleak that we are all in danger of becoming NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training – the term coined by Ed Balls, as Labour Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, for 14 to 19 year old disadvantaged and working-class boys. Their middle-class male and female equivalents were also likely to be taking a

GAP year between school and university (as Sue Heath has argued in Gender and Education/BJSE circa 2008-2009).

In addition to these two major publications for schools and higher education, there have also been other proposals for changes both within education and in allied policy areas. For instance, despite major reviews of 14-19 year old education carried out under the Labour government, another committee has been set up to consider these issues, chaired by Professor Alison Wolf. She was asked by Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, in September 2010, to chair a review of vocational education for 14-19 year olds, and the relationships between public and private providers and the third sector, and further, vocational and higher education, and progression to work and the labour market. This report will be published in April 2011, with an interim report due in late December 2010. Clearly it too will have major gender implications, and we will consider them in due course in 2011, despite the fact that neither remit refers to gender.

## **Contextual Issues**

Before we detail the two reports, we should set out some key contextual issues. First, and most immediately, the coalition government has proceeded with speed to 'rectify' the perceived large deficit in public spending. It was argued that this was necessary to enable the UK economic recovery. Government policies and the context outlined in the Comprehensive Spending Review set the scene for major public and charity cutbacks across the board, from caring and health to education, all of them likely to have more severe implications for women than men.

Secondly, and linked to the above cutbacks, the Government carried out what was termed a 'bonfire of the quangos' – a cutting back on quasi- autonomous non-governmental organisations associated with implementing (former) government policies. One of the first acts was to remove the 'gender duty' from the recently extended provisions of the Equalities Act 2010 (which also included a 'class duty'). The gender duty required all Government departments, as well as other public and quasi-autonomous bodies, to conduct a gender audit of their policies and implications. Before the abolition of the gender duty,

Teresa May, Home Secretary, had written to her Treasury colleagues about whether a gender audit had been conducted, (indicating its legal status)

Thirdly, the Fawcett society (Fawcett link here) an independent charitable women's organisation together with the Women's Budget Group, conducted its own gender audit of government policy changes, and especially the budget. It was argued that the budget and the financial cutbacks were likely to have a greater impact on women, and children in families, than on men. The legal challenge reached the high court on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010. Unfortunately the Fawcett Society and WBG lost the case, although they were successfully able to ensure that the Treasury would make explicit the gender implications in its future decision-making.

Fourthly, the Royal Statistical Society, together with the Social Research Association, held its fourth Cathie Marsh memorial lecture in November 2010 on the Equal Pay Act (EPA) 1970 40 years on. Professor Jill Rubery among others provided ample evidence that, whilst there had been improvements to women's employment, under the EPA 1970, and in respect of education and training, there remains a massive gender pay gap, and acute gender segregation in relation to forms of employment.

Fifthly, a key report from the Labour Government, produced by a committee chaired by Alan Milburn, on fair access to the professions (July 2009) outlines the limits on social mobility and gendered social mobility through higher education, and professional development in higher education. A key finding is that there remains a glass ceiling for women in the professions (and across all major professional groups).

Now we turn to the two key reports of this period.

**1. 'An Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finances' entitled *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education (known as The Browne Report)***

This report was commissioned by Peter Mandelson, previous Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, in November 2009. The committee, chaired by John Browne, former CEO of BP, comprised a small number (7) of experts, with one young student from an ethnic minority, Rajay Naik, and two white women Diane Coyle (a liberal feminist economist) and Julia King (a university Vice Chancellor). Michael Barber, former Professor of Education at Keele University and Deputy Director at the Institute of Education, London University, was the main educationalist on the panel, which was light on university experts apart from David Eastwood, former CE of HEFCE, and now VC of Birmingham University. The main recommendations focus on the question of tuition fees, and the structure of HE funding, with very little on the complexities and inequalities in the HE system. Recommendations included:

1. Increases in tuition fees to £9,000 p.a. but with a cap at £6k above which universities would have to give a proportion back to the government (but not to HEFCE (link to HEFCE website) as it is to be abolished)
2. Funding for bursaries for poorer students through a new approach to grants and funding. Individual universities will be expected to develop more bursaries from their increased funding through higher tuition fees.
3. The inclusion of part-time students in the new systems of funding
4. Repayment of fees by students only when earning over £21k (more than the current £15k), and a longer period of repayment i.e. over 30 years compared to the current 20 years
5. The abolition of HEFCE and other Quangos and the replacement with an HE board.
6. Changes in the HE funding, reduction in funding of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (non-STEM), and continued funding for STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine)
7. Requirement for legislation for some aspects although some finances such as the switch between teaching and fees, and STEM versus non-STEM may not need legislation!

The implications of this are:

1. The increasing stratification of HE, or entrenching of elitism, since the government has already decided only to fund STEM subjects and to abolish funding teaching of social sciences, arts and humanities. The system favours older and Russell group (link to Russell group) universities at the expense of newer universities given the subject mix and balances.
2. Questions about what is called 'cost-sharing' i.e. between students, government and individual universities, which may be more progressive in the sense that funding will be redistributed to poorer students - but which overall constitutes a huge subsidy to the middle classes at the expense of poorer groups: and is more likely to penalise women than men, whatever class.
3. The extension of repayments and the inclusion of part-time students MAY mean that traditionally excluded groups, for instance mature women students, are more likely to go to university (though perhaps at the expense of working-class young women and men), who since repayment only starts at £21k, may never have to pay back the full tuition fees.
4. But the implications for postgraduates and women are especially severe, since child-care will be cutback, and housing costs and mortgages may well impede the chances of women wanting children. It is also the case that there will be severe implications for overseas students, and their familial relationships etc.

## **2. The White Paper on schools: *The future of teaching***

The education White Paper has important implications for girls, boys and issues of gender, racial, class, language and cultural (in)equality and identity in and around UK schools.

A web review of the report describes that it "sets out a radical reform programme for the schools system, with schools freed from the constraints of central Government direction and teachers placed firmly at the heart of school improvement." Indeed the report reads like an exemplary neo-liberal recipe for DIY self-hood (Harris, 2004), via de-centralisation, devolution, and the championing of individual students, parents, teachers and schools as

the various units of educational entrepreneurialism in the brave new schooling world of the 'Big Society'.

It follows that key aspects of the report are 'improving discipline by trialling a new approach to exclusions', 'a transformed curriculum with rigorous assessment and qualifications', 'more academies and free schools', and more 'school-led improvement, replacing top-down initiatives.'

One of the most important aspects of the report is a return to 'core subjects' for every student to 'master', so the National Curriculum can operate as a 'rigorous benchmark'.

On the surface one could agree that there were some *weaknesses* within the previous system that needed to be addressed. Such weaknesses included the lack of grammatical corrections for subjects outside of the core curriculum – for example ICT. Students thus were able to achieve an A\* grade despite their exam paper containing many grammatical errors. Another such weakness was the way in which the modular system was used to boost initial grades. However, one of the reasons for the change to the modular system was to allow for students with mitigating circumstances to retake modules that they had missed. However, there have been murmurs of a different reason for the change from modular back to the more 'traditional' approach to taking exams. In 2009 coursework assessment was dropped from maths, leading to boys outperforming girls for the first time since 1997. In 2010 it was dropped for other subjects, and replaced by work done under exam conditions, with serious gendered implications:

"If boys start outperforming girls at GCSE, it will also have repercussions for higher education. The HEPI report [a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute] suggested that the switch away from exam-only qualifications had led to women's dominance at university, where women now outperform men on almost every higher education indicator, and in most degree subjects. If boys start doing better at GCSE than girls, in the long term, female participation and performance in higher education could also decline". (Guardian 23rd August 2010)

The White Paper states the government intention is to want the best for all pupils, yet there appears to be no evidence that racist language and cultural equality and identity will be

addressed within the changes. In fact throughout the paper there is no mention of how the change in assessment will favour particular groups, say of (upper and upper middle class) boys rather than girls or other boys.

The question of where so-called hard subjects and assessment leaves the 'softer' cross-curricular, non-assessed work in areas such as PSHE, SRE and citizenship, which had previously offered spaces for engagement with gender equity issues in schools, remains opaque to say the least!

Despite an enormous focus on discipline (the section which comes first in the report), there is little guidance on what forms this renewed emphasis on behaviour might take, given the instability of some areas of the curriculum like PSHE. While the need to tackle 'prejudice-based' and 'anti-homophobic bullying' is mentioned in the paper, strategies for dealing with increasing rates of gender and sexualised violence and bullying in schools, which had some space for engagement in PSHE provision, is conspicuously absent.

Teacher training is another main focus of the White Paper, and while we may welcome that the Government appears to have some praise for the way teachers have been trained in the UK – how 'fairness' will underpin teacher training remains unclear. There is presently a wide-ranging way to learn to teach which includes; employment based routes, Teach First, PGCE and training schools. The current diverse routes into teaching have opened up access to people who were already qualified for a career in teaching, and at the same time allows others to gain teaching status on the basis of experience.

It is conspicuous that the White Paper does not address the need for diversity within teacher training. Instead the focus relies on the "offering financial incentives to attract very best graduates in shortage subjects into teaching" and the expansion of Teach First and the pithily named new initiative Teach Next options. There is no argument presented about the need for well-qualified graduates to have the opportunity to teach nor concern expressed that teaching should consist of a diverse workforce. There is much evidence (Malor et al. 2009; Gillborn 2008; Richardson 2005) to suggest that in order to raise the achievement for Black children (particularly African Caribbean) we must ensure that there is a significant number of teachers from black minority ethnic groups within the classroom. As Teach First

expands to attract elite Oxbridge students to train as teachers, there is a failure to recognise the lack of diversity within the programme, for example, there was just one black African Caribbean student who gained entrance to Oxford University of the 2009 intake.

Despite the various initiatives that have been available to promote BME teachers there has been a decline in the numbers wishing to choose teaching as an option. Furthermore, the BME teachers that do decide on teaching as a career may face racism during their school placements. The Government must acknowledge that only through the recruitment of a diverse workforce will satisfactory standards across all schools be achieved. One could argue that there are real questions and issues to be raised about the notion of identity, and the meaning of what it is to be truly 'English' within the context of this particular transformation of the education system.

Further contradictions in the White Paper surround the relationship between the local authorities and the prioritizing of 'school autonomy' since the report emphasises the need to allow every school to 'frame its own ethos, develop its own specialisms, free of either central or local bureaucratic constraint'. Serious questions arise again over how to ensure distributive justice and how we might adhere to duties such as gender and race equality duties, in the type of laissez-faire, free-for-all scenario called for by school autonomy.

The White Paper also claims that there will be greater transparency in how the money on schools is being spent and greater accountability of school funding. While this seems promising, it is argued that this transparency will be achieved by: "Putting far more information into the public domain, so that it is possible to understand a school's performance more fully than now." The Government will also "Reform performance tables so that they set out our high expectations – every pupil should have a broad education (the English Baccalaureate), a firm grip of the basics and be making progress."; and have "a new measure of how well deprived pupils do and introduce a measure of how young people do when they leave school." This tracking mechanism will be in the form of a 'Pupil Premium' to target more resources on the most deprived pupils.

In our reading, this type of hyper-performativity of schools, teachers and pupils will produce a competitive ethos that may well serve to put even greater emphasis on those individual

pupils and schools who fail to 'master' the 'broad' 'English' basics that education is being reduced to. This again has serious implications for the most marginalised who may well be more easily and systematically excluded from the platforms of 'choice, freedom and responsabilisation' (meaning policy framed by individuals autonomously, rather than by state or government) underpinning the White Paper.