David Willetts interview: 'We need a broader view of what constitutes a good university'

November 24 2017, by Karen Rowlingson

David Willetts was minister for universities and science in the coalition government from 2010 to 2014, when the cap on tuition fees was raised to £9,000 per year in England and Wales. In his new book, [A University Education](#)*, he provides a defence of that policy following intense recent debate about it.*

Willetts, who now sits in the House of Lords and is also the executive chair of the [Resolution Foundation](#)*, sees the fee rise as pivotal in increasing the number of people benefiting from higher education, a process he is keen to see continue further. But the book goes far beyond the tuition fee debate. It provides an engaging and authoritative guide to "the university" as an institution which aims to instil "values of pursuing truth through reason and evidence" – values of particular importance in the current context of "fake news" and populist politics.*

But while universities may share this overarching aim, Willetts also argues that we need to celebrate diversity in our higher education (HE) sector, rather than a single idea of what constitutes a top university. I sat down with him for The Conversation.

Karen Rowlingson: You show, in the book, that university education benefits society as well as individuals. So should the funding of universities also be better balanced between society and individual

students? Would one possibility be to reduce the fee and raise extra through general taxation and then change the repayment mechanism so that those on higher earnings pay more back?

David Willetts: I think actually the way that you can reflect and put in public support is different and I identify the ways we do. First of all … we should meet the extra cost of higher cost subjects. Secondly, students who for whatever reason … may find it harder to benefit from HE, for example disabled students, students from tough backgrounds, there's still some funding – not as much as there was – but there's still some funding for the extra costs of those students

And then thirdly, writing off the repayments from people with low incomes… So I think that's a well-designed, well-targeted way of using public resource to support people in [higher education](link).

But still the £9,250 a year fee is a very large share of the cost and is it fair that younger generations have to pay so much more for their higher education than older generations did?

I understand that argument. The good news is that I think most 18-year-olds do understand the reality that it is not an amount of money they have to pay up front. The real thing that matters is it's 9% of earnings above £21,000 – of course that's going up to 9% of [earnings above a threshold of £25,000](link).

Is that something you agree with, changing the threshold?

Well, I personally didn't think that 9% on earnings above £21,000 was unduly onerous. It meant that if you were earning £25,000 a year you were paying back 9% on the final £4,000 so that was £360 a year, £30 a month. If there were resources available to help people in HE, increasing the repayment threshold would not have been my priority. It's good that graduates are going to be paying back a lower proportion of their earnings, but as I say, I think one could have spent the money in other ways.

You talk about graduate tax in the book and that's one alternative that's been suggested. What are your thoughts on that?

Basically what we've got is a repayable education voucher for HE. You're given an education voucher and told, take it to the university. The university has to decide whether or not to admit you and then if you end up in a well-paid job, we'll gradually reclaim it off you. I know the graduate tax is now back on the agenda, but it does have a range of defects.

First of all it brings the whole system back into tax and public spending. And it's no longer the case that the individual is bringing the resource to educate him or her, instead it's coming as public expenditure out of central government. My view is that has never worked to the advantage of higher education, it's always ended up being at the back of the queue.

Secondly, you will expect some people to pay back a lot more than the cost of their higher education … That means if I am studying economics at the LSE or law at Oxford and some others which we know about, there are now massive penalties for me to study in the UK rather than going abroad. You're saying, by virtue of having done this course, you will be paying back a very large amount of money.

Thirdly, it doesn't solve today's funding problem. The big design question is do you collect it off current graduates? There's nothing in the system that tells the Inland Revenue I'm a graduate, so you need some massive exercise, to do a sort of Doomsday Book exercise, to try and work out the people in the country who are graduates. … You can only roll it in for future generations, so once you say it's for current students and their successors, it doesn't solve a problem for about ten years.

The last Labour government, encouraged by Gordon Brown, looked at it very carefully and all the people who were involved in the debate then, including Andrew Adonis … concluded that a graduate tax is a bad idea. So I don't think it's a flyer. Labour tried to make it work. All three political parties when they've actually been in office have ended up with this model that we've got.

When I talk to my own students it's the level of maintenance support which is a key problem. What do you think we should do about that?

I completely agree with you … The pressure point is cash to live on while you're at university. And in terms of access that's the pressure point. When I was in office we increased the total amount of maintenance cash available for students and it's gone up a bit more since. But … if there were any spare resource around, my priority would be more cash for students to help with their living costs while at university.

You talk about the benefits of the current system in increasing the numbers going to university. Do you think there is any kind of limit to the numbers of people that should go to university?

I don't believe in government setting a target. So I don't believe in the Blair 50% target [of people going to university] but I do absolutely think that in modern societies for deep social, cultural and economic reasons, the numbers going to university have increased, are increasing and ought not to be diminished. So if I look forward I see no reason why it should stop at 50%.

And also, this is a good thing, we've achieved 50% for women. We've not achieved 50% for men and so I think it would be good if men could catch up with the academic achievements of women.

Should we move towards a more comprehensive system of universities **that people could go to locally, perhaps?**

I think the English model is distinctive and I think it's a good thing that it's distinctive. The idea of going away from home to university I'm sure goes back to the Oxford and Cambridge model and then this extraordinary 600 years when they were the only two English universities suppressing attempts at creating other universities. Not until the 1830s did we get any further universities in England.

Now one of the effects of that was to establish very clearly the idea you went away from home to university and it is a really important rite of passage, especially in England. And I think it's a kind of managed transition to adulthood, it's about the most powerful effective form that the modern Western world has got.

So I do understand the value of people leaving home to go to university. I wouldn't want to see a situation where poor kids stayed at home and rich kids went away to university.

You talk a lot about digital innovation in education … will that help mature students who are less likely to go to university now? And

how do we reflect on that with the experience of the Open University at the moment which is going through a really difficult time**, but which is digitally advanced?**

I always kind of plead guilty on this, that one of the things in my time as universities minister that I most regret is the decline in the number of mature, part-time students. It was not the plan. What I thought we would achieve is by extending more fee loans to more mature students that they would take them out. But actually the evidence is that whilst the classic young person going to university to get their first degree understands and is comfortable with the graduate repayment scheme; that's not the case for mature students … That's where we both need technological innovation and we also need more funding.

You challenge the predominant, uni-dimensional hierarchy of universities and suggest that we should recognise the strength of some universities outside of the Russell Group. Can you say more about this?

One of the themes running through the book is that our understanding of what constitutes a good university is incredibly limited. When you look at the ones that get to the top of the conventional rankings, you do it above all by high-quality research and high prior attainment of your students. That is one model and it's a good model. But my frustration is people think that means that if you're a university that focuses more on teaching than on research and which takes students with lower priority attainments, that means you're a less good university. It doesn't. It means you've got a distinct and different mission.

So I'm trying to get people to have a broader view of what constitutes a good university. There are a range of ways of being world class and taking kids with lower attainment – pushing them forward and

transforming their life chances with strong links to local businesses is a fantastic way of being a world class university.

So how can we do that in practice? Shall we have different kinds of league tables?

Whatever the issues around the [Teaching Excellence Framework](#) (TEF) – and of course ministers have made clear from the beginning that it's a kind of first go, it's open to revision and amendment – the crucial prize of the TEF is at last we've got a league table that doesn't have exactly the same structure as every other league table. Although it is very tough really to measure teaching, nevertheless I think as the big data revolution reaches HE we will have increasing opportunities to do so.

Given that there are already many different universes serving different missions, do you think there's a gap? If a new university were to be set up tomorrow to meet today's needs, what would that new university look like?

The teaching of STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] would be a very strong candidate because as there is public funding for the higher-cost subjects and STEM of course comes with higher cost, eligibility for that public funding has become a kind of barrier to entry for new providers in this area. And that's particularly acute with medical schools which have very high costs and where hitherto there's been a kind of restriction on the numbers of medical students and NHS-linked medical schools. There's an Aston initiative on medical education, and I think Buckingham are trying to get into medical education.

And then on engineering there's this [Olin model](#) which is a different approach to engineering that is willing to take on people who may not have got A-levels in maths and physics. That's also very interesting. Engineering is a case study of why I care so much about broadening education and not having so much early specialisation. If you say in order to do engineering at university you have to have A-levels in physics and maths, you're down to about 4% of teenagers being eligible to do engineering. If classics was still working on the basis you've got to have A-levels in Latin and Greek, classics would have died as a discipline in English universities, but was obliged to change it sort of as the A-levels declined.

What about the idea of [challenge-led universities](#) **which bring together disciplines across the STEM/non-STEM divide to try to tackle major problems globally and nationally?**

It's not that I think that STEM is the only route to truth. The two cultures problem in England is acute, unusually acute, because of early specialisation.

I argue that universities have quite a high part of the responsibility for early specialisation because they're looking for people who already know a lot about a very narrow range of subjects. [That is] such a contrast with America where the most popular single course specified when you apply for an American university is undeclared.

As soon as you think about a university recruitment system where the biggest single group of people applying are called undeclared, and you think through how a classic English [university](#) would operate if the biggest single category of students had not yet decided what they're going to study, you realise the incredible power of the particular way we do admissions in England.

How do you think Brexit is going to impact on universities?

Well, I was a Remainer and there clearly are massive risks for universities from Brexit. On the research side … the fact that they've just started the FP9 discussions in Brussels [with no British representatives](#) around the table as they start shaping the research priorities for that next seven year programme in the EU is so dispiriting and frustrating.

For [student](#) recruitment, the evidence is a bit more complex because of course one of the results of Brexit has been a fall in the value of the pound. So that has meant we look cheaper if you're coming from abroad. Now on the other hand, EU students may lose their access to loans but we don't know that. You could imagine in the negotiations about the future long-term relationship that we say we will extend loans to British students to study in the EU in return for EU students having loans from their government, or from us, or some combination to come and study here. So I think that it is all up for negotiation and we must hope that we can signal that we're open to students and academics from around the world.

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