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 EDUCATING THE NATION: II. UNIVERSITIES*
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ABSTRACT. This paper continues the argument made in ‘Educating the Nation: I. Schools’, that democratic demand for ever widening access to education was the principal driver for expansion in the second half of the twentieth century. Demand for higher education was not as universalistic or egalitarian as demand for secondary schooling; nevertheless, it was pressing, especially from the late 1950s, and ultimately irresistible, enshrined in the ‘Robbins principle’ that higher education should be available to all qualified by ability and attainment. The paper tracks the fortunes of the Robbins principle from an initial period of rapid growth, through a mysterious period of sagging demand in the 1970s and 1980s, to the resumption of very rapid growth from the late 1980s. It remains the guiding light of higher-education policy today, though in very altered circumstances where the price is paid ultimately more by beneficiaries than from the public purse.

In my first address I argued that democracy, not meritocracy, was the driving force behind the provision of universal secondary education in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. Before the Second World War, when state secondary education was only on offer to a portion of the population, thus by definition selective, meritocracy (though not yet so-called) had a powerful appeal, as it promised fair access to selective schools. After the Second World War, however, when universal secondary education was promised, the terms of the debate changed radically. Education was now viewed within a universal welfare-state context, like health, and just as most people wanted the best health-care they also wanted the best education for all. By the end of the 1950s, a

* I owe many thanks to those specialists who have introduced me to the difficult technical issues involved in measuring and assessing educational participation, especially Jane Elliott and her (then) colleagues at the Institute of Education, Brian Dodgeon and Alice Sullivan, and Anna Vignoles in the Cambridge Faculty of Education. I owe further debts to Lord (Kenneth) Baker, Bahram Bekhradnia, Michael Jubb and Peter Syme for sharing their memories of the DES in the 1980s. For comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I am grateful to Deborah Cohen, John Davis, James Vernon and Anna Vignoles.

cross-party consensus was emerging for ‘grammar schools for all’, and in the 1960s this materialised as cross-party support for comprehensivisation. This democratic consensus on secondary education was not confined to the ‘consensus’ era; post-consensus politicians of the Thatcher stripe have maintained it to the present day, with the focus shifting away from selection for some towards raising standards for all.¹

Not quite the same argument can be made for higher education. Unlike secondary education, higher education has never been offered as a universal service. Only some people are deemed eligible for it. The governing principle since the 1960s has been the Robbins principle – ‘that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ – clearly a meritocratic principle.² Nevertheless, here I will argue that Robbins embedded this principle in a democratic context that assumed that not only the numbers of those ‘qualified by ability and attainment’ but also the numbers of those ‘who wish to do so’ would and should increase consistently for the foreseeable future. This was at least in part because access to higher education was umbilically connected to rising aspirations and attainments in secondary education, and thus implicated in the democratic discourse that governed secondary education. As with secondary education, this quasi-democratic approach to higher education, while born in the classic ‘consensus’ period, can be shown to have persisted and indeed intensified in allegedly post-consensus circumstances; though unlike secondary education its course did not run smooth. This makes, I think, for a more textured and a more interesting narrative, which I will trace from the 1960s to the present day.

I

Higher education did not figure prominently in the consciousness either of the nation or even of politicians at the end of the Second World War. Less than 3 per cent of the age-group entered full-time higher education and even at elite levels participation was patchy; Stanley Baldwin was the sole interwar prime minister with a university education. The only point at which the universities came regularly into the national consciousness was the Boat Race, which involved only two universities that enrolled few students.³ There was a widespread assumption that the potential constituency for university was limited by innate ability to perhaps 5 per

¹ ‘Educating the Nation: I. Schools’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, 24 (2014), 5–28.

² Committee on Higher Education, *Report* (1963), 8 (hereafter *Robbins Report*).

³ A. H. Halsey, *Twentieth-Century Social Trends* (Basingstoke, 2000), 226; John Carswell, *Government and the Universities in Britain: Programme and Performance 1960–1980* (Cambridge, 1985), 1–2.

cent of the population, and as late as 1956 only 5 per cent of working-class parents with primary school children expected them to go to university.⁴ There was, however, a new strain of political discourse about higher education in the immediate post-war years that was neither meritocratic nor democratic, but technocratic. Higher education was increasingly turned to by politicians for help with economic growth; thus the Percy Report of 1945 which called for a quadrupling of trained engineers, the Barlow Report of 1946 which called for a doubling of trained scientists and the Scientific Manpower Committee Report of 1956 which called for a further doubling. The context was not so much education as 'manpower planning', and the emphasis was not on quantity but on quality – the right kind of graduates rather than the right numbers. 'The prizes will not go to the countries with the largest population', said Anthony Eden at a speech in Bradford in January 1956. 'Those with the best systems of education will win. Science and technical skills give a dozen men the power to do as much as thousands did fifty years ago.' This speech formed part of a Conservative campaign to beef up technical education, which included upgrading of technical colleges, the creation of new Colleges of Advanced Technology (the CATs) and gentle prods of the University Grants Committee (the UGC) to shift the balance of university students from arts to sciences (which was, gently, achieved: the proportion of arts students in universities fell from 45 per cent in 1939 to 43 per cent in 1956).⁵

However, by the late 1950s, the focus on quality began to be eclipsed by issues of quantity, as a newly democratic tone had begun to enter the public discussion of higher education.⁶ Even scientific manpower planning had required an expansion of the system, as it proved easier to create new institutions such as the CATs than to get the universities to swing to the sciences. The real driver by the end of the 1950s, however, was not the supply-side concern for manpower planning but the growing evidence of unsatisfied demand for higher education, as a direct result of the advent of universal secondary education and growing aspiration for the 'best' education for all. As I argued in my first address, these aspirations

⁴ Sir Frederick Ogilvie, *British Universities* (1948), 12, 14; Research Services Limited, 'A Pilot Enquiry into Some Aspects of Working-Class Life in London' (1957), 37; Mark Abrams Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Box 85/1.

⁵ Jean Bockock, Lewis Baston, Peter Scott and David Smith, 'American Influence on British Higher Education: Science, Technology, and the Problem of University Expansion, 1945–1963', *Minerva*, 41 (2003), 328–43; Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order 1940–1990* (1991), 83–4, 92–5, 199–200; Michael Sanderson, 'Higher Education in the Post-War Years', *Contemporary Record*, 5 (1991), 417; University Grants Committee (hereafter UGC), *University Development 1952–1957*, Cmnd 534 (1958), 8.

⁶ Some but not all of the 'declinist' polemics of the 1956–63 period emphasised both quality and quantity; see, e.g., Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (1962), 195–217.

were widely doubted or even stifled within the political elite until the early 1960s, but they were evident to local authorities and to MPs with their ears to the ground as early as the mid-1950s. The same can be said of the knock-on effects for higher education. Social research monitored the demand for higher education closely in this period, developing a set of measures of demand which became the benchmarks for policymaking for the rest of the century. The most basic measure was the age-participation rate – the proportion of the 18- and 19-year-old cohort that actually took up places in higher education. This was the measure that had stood at 3 per cent before the war and by 1957 had pushed up to 7 per cent, thanks to steady expansion of both the university and other higher-education sectors – teacher-training colleges, art colleges, technical colleges and the CATs. It continued to rise to about 8 per cent in 1959, but then stuck at that level for the next few years. However, participation in higher education is not itself a pure expression of demand; it reflects also supply, how many places are available. To assess *potential* demand, researchers also tracked other measures – the staying-on rate (what proportion of the age-cohort stayed on at school after the school-leaving age of 15), and the qualified leaver rate (what proportion of the age-cohort achieved two A-Levels, then the minimum qualification for entry to university). Here lay the evidence of *unsatisfied* demand, a political problem. Widening access to O-Levels and therefore to A-Levels and qualified-leaver status led to a sudden jump in the qualified leaver rate from 7.5 per cent to 15 per cent between 1955 and 1959.⁷ This spurt in demand pressure could not be easily (and certainly not quickly) accommodated by university expansion, and while the UGC did lay plans for expansion – fifteen new universities were opened or planned before Robbins – politicians were keenly aware that both short- and long-term demand pressures were creating a new political problem for them, much as the clamour for ‘grammar schools for all’ was at secondary level.⁸ Just as there were many ‘frustrated’ parents failing to get grammar school places for their children, so there were smaller but increasing (and influential) numbers of 18-year-olds failing to get university places; whereas nearly 80 per cent of qualified leavers

⁷ Christopher A. Pissarides, ‘From School to University: The Demand for Post-Compulsory Education in Britain’, *Economic Journal*, 92 (1982), 656, 663. For contemporary awareness of this ‘hump’ in potential demand, see Maurice Kogan, Edward Boyle and Anthony Crosland, *The Politics of Education* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 93; Jean Floud’s evidence, *Robbins Report*, Evidence – Part II, Documentary Evidence, Cmnd 2154-XII (1963), 53, and Harold Perkin’s account in ‘University Planning in Britain in the 1960s’, *Higher Education*, 1 (1972), 113–16.

⁸ Michael Shattock, *Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945–2011* (Maidenhead, 2012), 4, argues that the Robbins principle was already tacitly accepted by the universities from 1945, but cf. 17, accepting the relative sluggishness of the universities’ initial response to demand. By 1962, with Robbins under way, the universities were positioning themselves for more rapid expansion.

gained university places in 1956, by 1962 fewer than 60 per cent got them.⁹ Accordingly, just as Conservative education ministers looked to expert committees to help them pave the road to comprehensivisation (the Crowther and Newsom Committees, which reported in 1959 and 1963), so they appointed in 1961 an expert committee chaired by Lionel Robbins to pave the road to the expansion of higher education that all parties knew would inevitably ensue from widening access to O- and A-Levels in all-ability schools.¹⁰

The seriousness with which the Robbins Committee was taken by the politicians (and by itself) speaks volumes both about the growing political significance attached to demand for higher education and to the greater care then taken about what is now called ‘evidence-based policy-making’ (as if there were any other kind). Robbins sat for two years, accumulated twelve volumes of evidence (and many more unpublished submissions), undertook seven study visits abroad and commissioned six national social surveys on various aspects of supply and demand. With so much evidence accumulated, and a cannily written report, it has been possible for subsequent commentators to label Robbins technocratic, meritocratic *and* democratic, indeed, even aristocratic.¹¹ Here, I make the case that both its language and especially its legacy were primarily democratic.

The central principle enshrined in the Report – ‘that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ – was avowedly a meritocratic principle. But it was embedded in the same democratic premises as the contemporaneous reform of secondary education. Robbins embraced the same critique of the ‘pool of ability’ – the meritocratic idea that there was a fixed stock of ability from which educational institutions had to select – and he drew on the same sources,

⁹ R. Layard and J. King, ‘The Impact of Robbins’ (1968), in *Economics and Education Policy: A Reader*, ed. Carolyn Baxter, P. J. O’Leary and Adam Westoby (1977), 20–2. Somewhat different measures were employed by Robbins, but marking a similar trend: *Robbins Report*, Appendix I: The Demand for Places in Higher Education, Cmnd 2154-I (1963), 119–22.

¹⁰ On the connection between Crowther, Newsom and Robbins, see Kogan, Boyle and Crosland, *Politics of Education*, 91–3.

¹¹ For technocratic, see Desmond King and Victoria Nash, ‘Continuity of Ideas and the Politics of Higher Education Expansion in Britain from Robbins to Dearing’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 12 (2001), 185–6, 191–2; for meritocratic, see Robert Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (2006), 148–51; for democratic, see Claire Callender, ‘Student Numbers and Funding: Does Robbins Add Up?’, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68 (2014), 164–70; for ‘aristocratic’, see A. H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1992), 11–14. And cf. the aristocratic diagnosis of Peter Scott, *Knowledge & Nation* (Edinburgh, 1990), 113, with his later more democratic account, no doubt rendered rosier by the contrasts he draws with the gloomy present, ‘Robbins, the Binary Policy and Mass Higher Education’, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68 (2014), 149, 151.

notably the work of the sociologist Jean Floud.¹² 'It is highly misleading', his report asserted, 'to suppose that one can determine an upper limit to the number of people who could benefit from higher education, given favourable circumstances', and a free and democratic society should create the favourable circumstances in which 'ability' would be ever more widely distributed. 'If there is to be talk of a pool of ability', the report continued, 'it must be of a pool which surpasses the widow's cruse in the Old Testament, in that when more is taken for higher education in one generation more will tend to be available in the next.'¹³ Here, Robbins took recent rapid increases in the staying-on and qualified-leaver rates and extrapolated them forward. Extrapolations were made to 2020 based on 'sober' calculations of steadily growing staying-on and qualified-leaver rates, plus a return to growth in the proportion of qualified leavers successfully finding higher-education places, as a result of the continuous process of university expansion that Robbins recommended. 'These figures involve what to many will seem a startling increase in numbers', the Report conceded, but indicated (correctly) that they were probably an underestimate, given the difficulty of projecting the effects of the new norm of progression, especially for women. There was no going back to mere 'manpower planning', based on the alleged needs of the economy – consumer *demand* was to be the prime mover of higher-education planning, and it was assumed that demand would grow steadily (or perhaps more than steadily) for at least twenty and probably sixty years. The Robbins escalator had begun to roll.¹⁴

Because the Robbins Committee had been appointed to justify a policy already more-or-less agreed on, the Conservative government accepted its recommendations immediately, and placed their democratic premises at centre stage. The Robbins principle was presented as the 'basic assumption' of the Report.¹⁵ The Labour government that succeeded soon after went further. From 1965, it created an entirely new layer of

¹² *Robbins Report*, Appendix I: The Demand for Places in Higher Education, Cmnd 2154-I (1963), esp. 80–5; memoranda from Jean Floud, 11 Mar. 1962, and Prof. P. E. Vernon, 18 July 1961: *Robbins Report*, Evidence – Part II, Documentary Evidence, Cmnd 2154-XII (1963), 45–57, 170–4.

¹³ *Robbins Report*, 8, 49, 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48, 63–71. On Robbins's preference for 'social demand' over manpower planning, see Layard and King, 'Impact of Robbins', 24; Kenneth Gannicott and Mark Blaug, 'Scientists and Engineers in Britain' (1973), in *Economics and Education Policy*, ed. Baxter, O'Leary and Westoby, 128.

¹⁵ Press Notice, Government Statement on the Robbins Report. Some civil servants urged the prime minister to assert the Robbins principle as 'a moral and social duty' and even to describe higher education as a 'universal' service that had the potential to become 'the greatest solvent of class differences', but cooler heads prevailed. 'Suggested points on the Robbins Report for inclusion in the Prime Minister's speech on the Debate on the Address', n.d.: The National Archives (hereafter TNA), ED 188/12.

higher-education institutions – the polytechnics, assembled from existing technical, art and education colleges – in order to speed up the pace of expansion being led painstakingly by the UGC. Robbins had explicitly advised against this, on the grounds (similar to the critique of the bipartite system in secondary education) that a binary system would never achieve parity of esteem. But Labour had both technocratic and democratic reasons for doing so. On the technocratic side, the expansion of the so-called public-sector institutions – polytechnics and colleges, then under the control of local authorities and subject to much more direct patronage from central government than the autonomous universities – permitted Labour to smuggle manpower planning in through the back door. On the democratic side, the public-sector institutions gave Labour more tools to speed up the expansion of places. Polytechnics and colleges could be run up quickly and cheaply, situated in city centres near to the target population, affording easier access by means of part-time study and sandwich courses (combining work and study). And indeed the public sector did expand more quickly than the university sector, such that it was providing half of all higher-education places by the early 1970s.¹⁶ The catchphrase that Labour used to justify its expansion policy – ‘social demand’ – was nicely ambiguous: was demand to be defined by the government’s estimate of ‘national needs’, a technocratic response, or by the countless individual choices of the mass of the people, the democratic response that Robbins had intended?

However, it would be a mistake to confine the impact of Robbins to questions of government policy: its true impact lay in the encouragement it gave to social demand at the grassroots. Contemporaries were well aware of the ‘euphoria’ that Robbins unleashed.¹⁷ The demand pressures that had been building up before 1963 were now relieved by improved supply, and this improved supply itself incited further demand, in a positive feedback loop. Aspirational parents could be confident that if their children were able to stay on after 15, they could reasonably expect a higher-education place; as the prime minister, Alec Douglas-Home, himself said in parliament, embracing the Robbins principle, ‘every father and mother in the country should know that if they have in the family a child who wishes to pursue a course of higher education, there should be a place at technical college or university for that boy or girl to fill’.¹⁸ Teenagers and their teachers could see the glittering new institutions all around them – not only the plateglass universities on green-field sites

¹⁶ Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 259, 263–4.

¹⁷ Layard and King, ‘Impact of Robbins’, 27–8; G. L. Williams, ‘The Events of 1973–1974 in a Long-Term Planning Perspective’ (1974), in *Economics and Education Policy*, ed. Baxter, O’Leary and Westoby, 40–2.

¹⁸ *Hansard*, fifth series, 684 (1963–4), 39–40 [12 Nov. 1963].

but colleges and polytechnics in their midst. The supply bottleneck was clearing.

At the same time, as the feedback loop closed, the growth of demand was accelerating. Pressures were now building up from earlier in the life-cycle. Comprehensive education was beginning to expose more children to O-Levels. A survey in 1968 found parents were paying considerably more attention to their children's progress through school than they had done in a survey just a few years earlier, in 1964. By 1968, two-thirds of all parents of primary children wished those children to stay in education not only past 15 but past 18, and, even more tellingly, three-quarters of parents of children in the last year of compulsory education wished for further education.¹⁹ As a result of these aspirations, by 1967 the qualified-leaver rate had increased to a level 25 per cent higher than Robbins had predicted for that date.²⁰ And because the supply constraints had been relaxed, especially in the public sector, the actual participation rate for higher education surged as well: having been stagnant between 1959 and 1962 at around 8 per cent, it grew rapidly to about 12 per cent by 1967, having by then already reached Robbins's target for 1970.²¹ Indeed, the doors to higher education had not only been opened, but a welcome sign had been posted on them, in the form of a new student-grant regime which had become virtually universal (for qualified entrants) by 1969.²²

In this euphoric period of the late 1960s, higher education became something aspired to by larger and larger segments of the population, regardless of whether they had prior experience of it. Demand had become the driving force that government was now committed to meeting regardless of its own manpower-planning or other agendas. Awareness of this new grassroots political force was keenly registered by experts and in government. There were different but congruent

¹⁹ J. M. Bynner, *Parents' Attitudes to Education* (1972), 13–18. Bynner's survey for the OPCS Social Survey Division, undertaken in 1968, offers some useful comparisons with the 1964 Government Social Survey work undertaken for the Plowden Committee, although not all measures allow a straightforward comparison.

²⁰ Richard Layard, John King and Claus Moser, *The Impact of Robbins* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 14–16, 22–5.

²¹ It is unwise to try to be too precise even about APR, as slightly different statistical measures even of the same rate were employed by contemporaries. For Robbins's estimate of APR in 1961 (8.3 per cent) and its target for 1970 (12.8 per cent), see *Robbins Report*, Appendix 1: The Demand for Places in Higher Education, Cmnd 2154-I (1963), 151. For Layard, King and Moser's estimate of APR in 1961 (8.3 per cent) and in 1967 (14.3 per cent), see *Impact of Robbins*, 24. But cf. Michael Shattock, 'Demography and Social Class: The Fluctuating Demand for Higher Education in Britain', *European Journal of Education*, 16 (1981), 384, with lower estimates of APR in 1962 (7.2 per cent) and 1967 (11.8 per cent), rising to a peak of 14.2 per cent in 1972: these are the figures used in the DES in the 1970s, for which see below pp. 10–11, 17. Some uncertainty arises from the fact that in the earlier period it was harder to define what was included in 'higher education' below degree level.

²² Williams, 'Events of 1973–1974', 47.

economic and sociological versions of this new understanding of demand. Among the economists, human-capital arguments saw education as an ‘investment good’, which accrued value to both individuals and society from the benefits it conveyed in terms of lifetime income and GDP growth.²³ A more sociological argument considered that the loosening class structure of modern societies meant that higher education for personal development could now be a goal for more if not all families, not just those with a past track-record in higher education.²⁴ In between lay another economic argument, which viewed education as a ‘consumption good’, which was valued for itself and thus more sought after naturally with growing affluence, regardless of its future payoff. Higher education had become, in the words of the American expert Martin Trow, ‘one of the decencies of life rather than an extraordinary privilege reserved for people of high status or extraordinary ability’.²⁵ All of these arguments shifted attention away from the technocratic towards the democratic case for widening participation. That case was further fortified by a series of reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showing that growing demand for higher education was evident across the developed world.²⁶ As a result of this new valuation placed on the demand side, supply-side planning went into decline, on the Left as much as on the Right. Robbins – a liberal economist after all – had already deprecated manpower planning as imprecise and probably futile. The consumer was king. Even at the time of his report, for example, it was clear that the technocratic ‘swing to science’ had gone into reverse; the new demand for higher education was in the arts and especially in the social sciences (either as better for personal development or better for the modern labour market, or both).²⁷ Despite further efforts by the Labour government to reverse what was now recognised as the ‘swing away from science’, by the end of the 1960s ‘social demand’ no

²³ On the entry of human capital arguments into educational planning, see Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* (1987), 94–5; Vera Morris, ‘Investment in Higher Education in England and Wales: A Subject Analysis’ (1973), in *Economics and Education Policy*, ed. Baxter, O’Leary and Westoby, 72–5; Maurice Peston, ‘Higher Education Policy’, in *Higher Education and the Labour Market*, ed. Robert Lindley (Guildford, 1981), 120–47.

²⁴ Bocock, Baston, Scott and Smith, ‘American Influence’, 343 (citing A. H. Halsey and Jean Floud).

²⁵ Martin Trow, ‘Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education’, in OECD Conference on Future Structures of Post-Secondary Education, *General Report: Policies for Higher Education* (Paris, 1974), 90.

²⁶ See, e.g., OECD, Directorate for Scientific Affairs, ‘Development of Higher Education in OECD Member Countries: Quantitative Trends’, 3 Apr. 1969, a copy in TNA, UGC 7/1245.

²⁷ *Robbins Report*, 48, 71–4; *ibid.*, Appendix II (A): Students and their Education, Cmnd 2154-II (1963), 30–1.

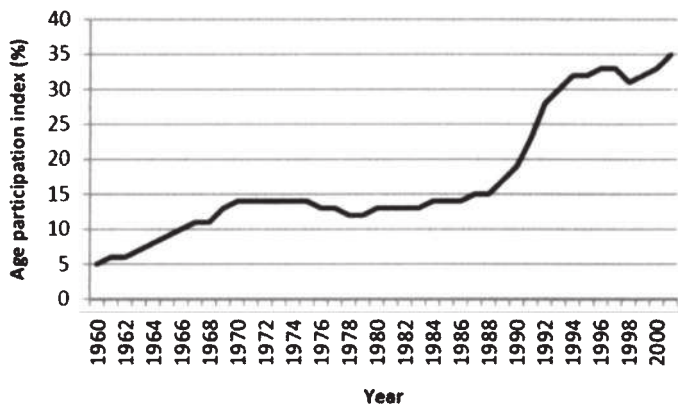


Figure 1 HE participation, 1960–2001.
 Source: Reproduced from Walker and Zhu, ‘Impact of University Degrees’, 14.

longer meant what the Labour government demanded, but what millions of ordinary citizens demanded.²⁸ Bureaucratically, it was easier to use Robbins-style projections to plan for demand than highly suppositious manpower targets, and even the Treasury liked the predictability of public-expenditure targets that could be projected years ahead.²⁹ Thus, experts, bureaucrats and politicians alike had been nudged into accepting that the agenda for higher education was being set by teenagers and their parents. That agenda was a democratic one – higher education was achieving in ever widening circles the status of a new social norm. The Robbins escalator looked to be climbing a stairway to heaven.³⁰

II

And then the Robbins escalator just stopped dead (Figure 1). Why exactly this happened has been one of the two great mysteries that I seek to

²⁸ I discuss the ‘swing away from science’ in ‘The Two Cultures Revisited: The Humanities in British Universities since 1945’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, forthcoming 2015. As contemporaries knew well, this was also an international trend: OECD, *Development of Higher Education 1950–1967* (Paris, 1971), 126, 129–36, 206–7, but cf. 227.

²⁹ Morris, ‘Investment in Higher Education’, 72–5; UGC, *University Development 1962–1967*, Cmnd 3820 (1968–9), 95–101.

³⁰ Carswell, *Government and the Universities*, 139–40, argues that right up until the 1972 White Paper governments of both parties had rejected the ‘will o’ the wisp’ of manpower planning and embraced the ideal of higher education for ‘personal development’. Carswell was the senior civil servant in the DES with responsibility for higher education. See also Perkin, ‘University Planning’, 119.