Augar: no reason to get excited

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The Augar *Review of Post-18 Education* has been long trailed as the Tory riposte to Labour's promise to scrap university fees as part of its 2017 nearly-general-election-winning anti-austerity campaign. It was commissioned by Theresa May in February 2018 from City Equities broker Philip Augar. He was advised by cross-bench Baroness Alison Wolf, previously Coalition education advisor. Its late publication in the week May resigned, and just as many universities closed for the summer, largely explains the lukewarm response it received. In any case, since it is only a series of recommendations rather than a call to action, there's little to get excited about, and Augar's restricted brief does not allow space to promote radical alternatives.

The Review attracted the most hostile comments from those most directly involved in tertiary level F&HE - like the National Union of Students and UCU, as well as the Labour Party itself. But critique has not gone further than to point out that the Tories' latest promise to reduce but not scrap fees is a con - unlike in fee-free Scotland (for Scots students anyway). Nevertheless, the proposal to cut the maximum fee chargeable to undergraduates by around £1,500 to £7,500 per year from 2021-22 should be welcomed. So should the recommendation to restore minimum maintenance grants of £3,000 for those with maximum entitlement, and the promise that university income will be protected by an increased government contribution to teaching costs.

Here's the first rub though: Augar recommends this contribution be directed at courses which cost more to deliver and offer better 'value' to students and taxpayers. 'Expensive and useful' courses (like science and technology) will then be subsidised in universities at the expense of 'cheap and useless' ones (like arts and humanities). So, Augar aims not at a completely free market, as touted by free-market fundamentalists like Willetts (see below), but, once again, at a 'quasi-market' manipulated by the state. Any additional resources that Augar's review might secure will of course be welcome, but his 'value for money' approach should be rejected, because it restricts the measure of value of a course or qualification to the commodified 'exchange value' of what it is worth on the graduate labour market. This neglects any personal or other value to the individual or to society.

And here's the second rub: whatever subject they take, students will still graduate with tens of thousands of pounds of debt that many will never fully repay. In fact, as critics have pointed out, rather than helping poorer graduates, such fee reductions as are recommended will benefit those with higher incomes who will be able to pay off their debts more quickly. For those who can't, the current 30-year period during which loans are repayable will be extended to 40 years, costing graduate-debtors more to pay off. The Treasury hopes the slightly lower fees that get paid off more rapidly can be offset against the £40bn+(?) unpaid debt mountain that has piled up since £9,000+ fees were introduced in 2012 and which government has unsurprisingly repeatedly failed to sell on to debt collectors.

These proposals only tinker with, rather than challenge, the disastrous model introduced by Coalition HE minister, now chancellor of Leicester University and Lord, David Willetts. This was introduced as part of Willetts's effort to 'marketise' HE by pricing out the many to return HE to the few. (Meanwhile, Gove as Education Secretary made school exams harder to pass and the academic National Curriculum even more academic so that it was also more difficult to qualify for HE in the first place.) Willetts's failure shows how he, and the Resolution Foundation he now chairs to campaign on behalf of young people, totally misunderstand graduate and postgraduate indebtedness - for which Willetts is, after all, chiefly responsible!

Like previous tertiary reports (Robbins, Dearing, Browne - each published, as pointed out by *wonkHE*, just before the fall of the governments that commissioned them!), the review cites gross sector inequalities within post-18 provision, comparing the 'care' of the HE-educated with those relegated to FE. It then despairs at the current - admittedly sorry - state of apprenticeships. Yet, while reasserting a more

flexible and modular approach to lifelong learning post-18, which the review suggests should be 'broader' and therefore less academic, Augar - like his predecessors (Robbins partially excepted) - pushes a 'skills agenda'. In other words, just as we've heard for the past forty years and more, ever since industrial apprenticeships collapsed along with the rest of UK heavy industry, there is 'a skills gap' which can be 'bridged' by F&HE - especially FE for all those (boys mainly) who have 'basic' skills but not 'advanced' ones. Then, 'the right mix of basic and advanced skills to support economic activity in both the private and public sector will meet the country's needs' (p15).

In other words, disregarding automation, outsourcing and deprofessionalisation, Augar thinks the task of restoring the UK's remaining productive base can be met by more people with intermediate, sub-degree, technical qualifications, or by getting those doing the wrong types of apprenticeship at the wrong level onto the right course. This argument was central also to Cameron/Osborne/May's 'industrial strategy', and it creeps into Labour thinking too - at least as far as its 2017 manifesto was concerned, when the Party advocated a new technical route with revamped 'T-line', ie 'basic', training. This also dovetails with a recent Office of National Statistics report implying that, because there are too many of them, graduates are 'overeducated'. They are 'overcertified' perhaps, since the term 'skill' is nowadays a proxy for certification! At the same time, many employers claim many job applicants are 'overqualified'! Therefore, in keeping with the Government's post-16 plan, Augar follows Baroness Wolf's tediously repeated refrain of cutting back on academic courses to encourage more to follow extended vocational ones - a route most young people and many of their parents know will be a second-rate 'degree' for precarious employment at best.

Of course, young people - and older ones - should have opportunities to participate in well-funded and properly resourced tertiary courses below degree level if they wish. Augar is right that increased funding and better financial support for students is needed, but his review fails to provide concrete examples to justify the economic necessity for this. Nor does it ask whether employers in an economy with a collapsed 'middle' - and so a 'pear-shaped', rather than pyramidal, occupational class structure in which general downward social mobility is the norm compared with exceptional upward mobility - really are any more short of appropriate workers than they would be if they offered better wages, conditions and prospects. Additionally, the review barely mentions the implications for knowledge and skills of AI in a '*fourth industrial revolution*' or '*second machine age*'. Rather than just 'racing against the machine', Augar does not consider how society can instead control and so benefit from these changes.

As a result, the true reasons go unexplained for deepening 'diploma devaluation' or 'qualification inflation' - the acquisition by many of qualifications that were originally designed for a few. Today's declining decent employment opportunities, following from the disappearance of 'youth jobs' previously linked to industrial apprenticeships, are the main reason why those who qualify are willing to become indebted for degrees of often dubious quality with little labour-market currency. In addition, employers are increasingly reluctant to recruit school or college leavers but prefer older - often semi-retired and part-time - 'mature employees'. This results in half of new apprenticeships subsidising retraining existing employees or those over 25. Most young people - especially the 60 per cent of young women now attending some form of HE - plus their parents therefore see university as their only hope for the secure, semi-professional posts to which they aspire, even as more and more jobs become 'graduatised' so that they may require a degree for application but hardly demand degree level knowledge and skills to actually do them. Consequently, young people face the prospect of becoming 'downwardly mobile', running faster and faster up a down-escalator of devalued 'skill' certification simply to stand still.

The review notes the overlap between the two sectors of tertiary education in which FE, public or private, increasingly franchises degree or sub-degree level qualifications. It fails to recognise moreover that HE has turned into FE, ignoring the glaring differences between elite and mass tertiary education. For this is a tertiary system in another US sense: at the top an Ivy League, distinct from State Universities in the middle and then Community Colleges at the bottom where kids are warehoused for precarious labour.

In the UK, if general education to graduation from state secondary schooling at 18 built upon a primary foundation, proposals for an entitlement to lifelong continuing adult further and higher education and training could be recognised as the tertiary level of a National Education Service. Available on demand lifelong, it would relieve the pressure to 'go to uni or die', especially if employment with training opportunities were available as an alternative but with the option to return to level 3 learning as and when required or desired for research or scholarship to develop expertise, technical invention and (re)creation. It would include the new National Youth Service called for by Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. It would also support career development in a National Care Service linked to the NHS, along with the innovations required in a Green New Deal by contributing to the social mobilisation unparalleled in peacetime that is already required to ameliorate gathering climate catastrophe.