

The Impact of Historical Background in Higher Education Reform: Post-War England

Yükseköğretim Reformunda Tarihsel Arka Plan Etkisi: Savaş Sonrası İngiltere

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Abstract

This article examines the historical context leading up to the higher education reforms of the 1960s in England, focusing on the key factors that facilitated these transformative changes. The period saw the convergence of three crucial features: political consensus, financial optimism, and social restructuring. Political consensus helped to create broad-based support for reform, while financial optimism enabled increased government investment in education. Social restructuring, driven by a desire for greater access to education and social mobility, provided the societal impetus for change. Together, these elements formed the foundation necessary for the successful and effective reform of higher education in England. Through a historical analysis, this article explores how these forces interacted and shaped the development of higher education policy during this period. The article concludes by highlighting the lasting impact of these historical forces on the direction of higher education policy, asserting their continued relevance in understanding contemporary reform processes.

Keywords: Higher Education, Reform, Robbins Report, England, Historical Analysis

Özet

Bu makale, 1960'larda İngiltere'deki yükseköğretim reformlarının altyapısını oluşturan tarihsel bağlamı inceleyerek, bu kapsamlı dönüşüm sürecini kolaylaştıran başat unsurlara odaklanmaktadır. Bu dönemde, tarihsel arka planda belirgin olarak ortaya çıkan üç önemli durum gözlemlenmiştir: siyasi uzlaş, ekonomik iyimserlik ve toplumsal yeniden yapılanma. Siyasi uzlaş, İngiltere'de reform için geniş tabanlı ve kalıcı bir destek sağlarken, ekonomik iyimserlik, eğitimde giderek artan devlet yatırımlarını mümkün ve sürdürülebilir kılmıştır. Toplumsal yeniden yapılanma eğilimi ise, eğitimde daha fazla erişim, fırsat eşitliği ve sosyal hareketliliği sağlama arzusuyla, değişim için güçlü bir toplumsal itici güç oluşturmıştır. Bu üç unsur, İngiltere'deki yükseköğretim reformlarının başarılı, etkili ve uzun vadeli bir şekilde gerçekleşmesi için ihtiyaç duyulan temel zemin olmuştur. Tarihsel bir analiz yoluyla, bu makale, söz konusu unsurların nasıl etkileşime girdiğini ve bu dönemde yükseköğretim politikalarının gelişimini nasıl şekillendirdiğini ayrıntılı olarak incelemektedir. Makale, bu tarihsel unsurların, yükseköğretim politikasının yönünü şekillendirmedeki kalıcı ve dönüştürücü etkisini vurgulayarak, aynı zamanda bu unsurların günümüzdeki reform süreçlerini anlamadaki önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yükseköğretim, Reform, Robbins Raporu, İngiltere, Tarihsel analiz

The post-war period stands out as a time when higher education entered an expansion phase in many countries, particularly in Europe, and higher education systems were reexamined as a whole. Especially after 1960s, the issue of increasing the number of available student places and diversifying higher education institutions to meet the growing demand for higher education emerged. One of the countries where such a higher education reform was implemented is the United Kingdom. The 1963 *Robbins Report*, prepared at the suggestion of the government to

evaluate the current state of higher education and offer recommendations for its future, became the vehicle of these restructuring efforts. This report enabled a process of change in British higher education, unprecedented and unrepeated. The *Robbins Report*, which still occupies a unique place in the history of British higher education due to the importance of its role in the higher education landscape, is considered a document whose influence is still claimed to endure. This study will examine the historical background of the transformation of British higher

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education shaped by the *Robbins Report* and its impact, focusing on the political, economic, and social environment that created the foundation for an effective higher education reform. The article will discuss the idea that the political consensus, economic optimism, and atmosphere of social reconstruction in post-war England provided the groundwork for a successful institutional reform and the restructuring of higher education.

This study, based on the perspective that institutional structures are shaped in relation to the societies to which they belong, and that each society establishes its own unique institutional structures and operations, draws on theories that claim certain institutional logics influence institutional operations (Bastedo, 2009; Cai & Mountford, 2021; Lepori, 2016; Thornton et al., 2012). This approach will discuss, by examining a historical period in detail, the view that certain political, economic, and social conditions can enhance the effectiveness of institutional reforms. This is because the study adopts the idea that specific political, economic, and social structures and operations affect institutional structures and operations, highlighting the interaction between societies and institutions.

The 1960s in the UK represent both a period centered on the expansion of higher education and also a turning point when many other reforms in the sector emerged. Although various reform initiatives took place in British higher education before the *Robbins Report* none proved more influential or enduring; and while some European higher education reforms had comparable significance, few matched its lasting impact (Hillman, 2023). Today, studying the *Robbins Report* is particularly relevant to Türkiye, where the number of higher education institutions and students has surged over the past two decades. The report exemplifies the importance of aligning higher education policies with the existing social structure in the face of rapid expansion and change, providing a relevant example for Türkiye.

This study, originating from doctoral research on building consensus in higher education reforms, focuses on the period from the post-war era to the 1960s in British society. It aims to identify the specific political, economic, and social structures and conditions that shaped this process, addressing them under separate headings. As part of this research, a range of academic works related to British higher education in the 1960s were consulted in the British Library and Bodleian Libraries over a period of two months, during which historical analyses, sociological studies of higher education, and broader higher education research were examined. As a result of this research, the critical role of the *Robbins Report* in British higher education was recognized, and the report itself was studied. Additionally, visits to the National Archives provided access to documents pertinent to the *Robbins Report*. The article, drawing on this work, will

analyze the political, economic, and social conditions of the period, alongside the defining characteristics of British higher education reform during the historical period under review. In the final section, the *Robbins Report*—recognized as a key driver of higher education reforms in the United Kingdom—will be outlined in broad terms. Thus, by employing historical analysis, this study seeks to uncover the historical background that enabled and shaped institutional reforms in higher education while also examining how the transformation of higher education was interconnected with this historical experience.

Post-War Period in England

To better understand the period focused on in this study—the era centered on new higher education reforms—it is beneficial to examine the process from the post-war period up to the 1960s with references to the first half of the century. The effects of decisions made and planned transformation processes following 1945 began to manifest in the 1950s and 1960s. Analyzing this process from political, economic, and social perspectives will provide insight into the historical context that underpins the transformation of British higher education.

The twentieth century stands out as a period in Europe characterized by significant political, economic, and social changes. This era represents a continuation and intensification of the innovations and transformations of the nineteenth century, manifesting an even more pronounced curve of change than the previous century, and spreading more widely (Roberts, 1997). Just as the nineteenth century was marked by intense criticisms of social structures, the twentieth century became a period during which these criticisms were translated from intellectual debates into lived social practices (Blanning, 2000).

The first half of the twentieth century, shaped by two devastating world wars, was a time during which the national state boundaries were redefined both geographically and intellectually, national unity and economic resources underwent significant changes, and a new international order was started to be formed in England. The two world wars represent striking historical experiences that determined how this new order would be maintained and by what means. Although England was relatively spared the physical effects of the wars due to its geographical location compared to continental Europe, the economic and social effects of the wars left long-lasting marks on the nation (Tomka, 2013). Therefore, any study focusing on post-1950 England must address the effects of the war, as these effects proved to be shaping forces in political, economic, and social spheres alike.

England, which entered the First World War as an empire, found itself grappling with the evolving boundaries of its national power and authority during the Second World



War. After the Second World War, England entered a period marked by the gradual dismantling of its imperial structure, focusing on redefining itself within national borders (Knight, 2006; Mandler, 2006). The dissolution of the administration of British India in 1947 represents one of the most striking elements of this transformation. The new phase required England to preserve its power while also securing a respected position among its peer nations (Black, 2017). This line of thought became one of the fundamental ideas shaping the political policies of the second half of the twentieth century in England. This shift brought about centralization, nationalization, and systemic restructuring in the country.

One notable trend in this new period was the emphasis on nationalization. With the Labour Party coming to power in 1945, the focus on nationalization and nation-building increased, marking a new era in which the issue of national welfare was brought to the forefront and the concept of the welfare state became central. To this end, efforts such as the establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) and the nationalization of education and social security services began (Corby, 1999). These policies were the result of efforts to standardize living conditions across the nation, and this push toward standardization was accompanied by a process of centralization. This period saw a strong emphasis on achieving nationwide unity in areas such as the economy, health, and education through systematic planning and state-centered administration. Complaints about administrative inefficiencies, fragmentation, and lack of coordination that were prevalent in the pre-war period were addressed during this post-war process through centralization and nationalization.

The efforts toward centralization and nationalization generally reflected a broader attempt to establish a more systematic and controlled administrative system. In the pre-war period, services such as education, health, and social security were marked by a relative disorder and a lack of centralized oversight. This new period sought to introduce a more uniform and planned approach to managing these sectors. This shared vision across different governments in the post-war period led to what is referred to as a period of consensus in English history, a period that lasted until the late 1970s (Knight, 2006, pp. 53, 95). Although different researchers date this consensus period to varying intervals, the general agreement is that this period began in the 1940s and came to an end with the arrival of the Thatcher government (Coxall & Robins, 1998). This consensus period laid the groundwork for the establishment of more centralized, national, and systematized institutions in England. Higher education institutions, too, were part of this reorganization, as they were re-examined in light of centralization and systematization efforts.

Political Consensus:

The Foundations of a Well-Accepted Reform

In England, political governance has been exercised through a bicameral parliamentary system—composed of the House of Lords and the House of Commons—since the 14th century. Members of the House of Lords are appointed (except some hereditary peers), while members of the House of Commons are elected. Decision-making processes are carried out primarily by the representatives in the House of Commons, and the decisions made are reviewed and amended by the House of Lords before they become law. The political executive power has fundamentally alternated between two major parties in England: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Since all elections following 1918 resulted in one of these two parties emerging as the winner, political competition has remained largely between these two entities. Before the 1940s and during the two wars, the Conservative Party dominated the political scene; however, after the Second World War, political support began to shift in favour of the Labour Party. This trend was also observable across other European countries following the war as left-leaning parties gained unprecedented levels of support as alternatives to right-wing parties (Black, 2017). However, this did not signify a sharp leftward shift in England but rather reflected the convergence of the two parties' areas of influence and policy approaches.

Between the end of the war and the following 25 years, England experienced eight general elections in 1945, 1950, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1964, 1966, and 1970. In the 1945, 1950, 1964, and 1966 elections, the Labour Party secured victory and formed the government. Conversely, the Conservative Party won the elections in 1951, 1955, 1959, and 1970. After 1970, with the exception of the Labour Party's one-year victory in 1974, the Conservative Party maintained its position in government until 1997 (■ Figure 1).

■ Figure 1

Governments Formed Following General Elections in the UK (Uberoi et al., 2025)

Date	Party forming government	Prime Minister	Majority ¹
14/12/1918	² Coalition	David Lloyd George	283
15/11/1922	Conservative	Andrew Bonar Law	74
06/12/1923	³ Labour	Ramsay MacDonald	None
29/10/1924	Conservative	Stanley Baldwin	210
30/05/1929	Labour	Ramsay MacDonald	None
27/10/1931	⁴ National	Ramsay MacDonald	492
14/11/1935	⁵ National	Stanley Baldwin	242
05/07/1945	Labour	Clement Attlee	147
23/02/1950	Labour	Clement Attlee	6
25/10/1951	Conservative	Sir Winston Churchill	16
26/05/1955	Conservative	Sir Anthony Eden	59
08/10/1959	Conservative	Harold Macmillan	99
15/10/1964	Labour	Harold Wilson	5
31/03/1966	Labour	Harold Wilson	97
18/06/1970	Conservative	Edward Heath	31
28/02/1974	Labour	Harold Wilson	None
10/10/1974	Labour	Harold Wilson	4
03/05/1979	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher	44
09/06/1983	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher	144
11/06/1987	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher	101

Immediately following the war, the Labour Party won the elections by a significant margin. The Labour Party came to power with a platform that resonated more with the social expectations of the time, focusing on nationalization, equal access to resources and opportunities for all, and establishing the welfare state. Having successfully implemented these promises, the Labour Party won the next election as well. However, seeking to increase its numerical presence in Parliament, it called for new elections, but after the 1951 election, the government was handed over to the Conservative Party. The Conservative Party's thirteen-year government, lasting until 1964, was later labeled by the Labour Party and its supporters as the "*thirteen lost years*," criticized for the waste of many opportunities (Bogdanor & Skidelsky, 1970, p. 55).

When the Labour Party returned to power in 1964, it did not demonstrate a significant departure from the policies of the Conservative Party, which it had opposed. The political climate from 1945 until the 1970s continued with largely similar policies across successive governments. Examining post-1945 British political history reveals that the period was defined not by sharp ideological divides between the two major parties but by policies that largely aligned across party governments, reflecting a lack of significant divergence. This period is therefore referred to by British historians as an "*age of consensus*" (Bogdanor & Skidelsky, 1970, p. 11; Knight, 2006, pp. 53, 129; Smith, 1990, p. xi). This consensus period was possible because, in the post-war context, key goals and common adversaries were shared across political divides.

While the Conservative Party and Labour Party would typically be expected to maintain strong opposition to one another, between 1945 and 1977, their policies and attitudes were largely similar. This phenomenon can be interpreted as England's emergency development strategy—indeed more as a natural reaction—in the post-war reconstruction period, during which efforts were focused on building institutional systems across many areas rather than political conflict. This pragmatic political consensus created opportunities for decision-making and efficiency in implementation. The expansion and restructuring of universities would occur within this environment of broad social reforms and consensus (Anderson, 1992, p. 25).

One of the central debates in post-war England was the nation's relative positioning compared to countries like France, Germany, and the United States. Concerned about falling behind its peers in areas like healthcare, education, and social security, post-war England prioritized implementing necessary reforms over engaging in political disputes. Education policies reflected this bipartisan cooperation, as both Conservative and Labour Party governments maintained similar approaches without major conflicts. Changes such as raising the school-leaving age and reorganizing high schools by category, as well as addressing

higher education within a new system, were continued by successive governments. These reforms provided the necessary foundations for longer-term changes in higher education (Berdahl, 1959, p. 170; Stewart, 1989, p. 95).

In 1961, with the goal of examining higher education as a whole and proposing the necessary reforms, Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan established a committee. Named the *Robbins Committee* after its chairman, Lord Robbins, the committee spent two years preparing its findings and recommendations. The resulting *Robbins Report* was presented to Parliament in October 1963 by the Prime Minister. When the Labour Party came to power in 1964, the proposed policies from the *Robbins Report* began to be implemented. Despite the political change, this transition did not negatively affect the application of the report's recommendations. With only a few exceptions, the Labour Party adopted the report's proposals in their entirety. The government and higher education institutions maintained coordinated efforts, and the new policies were widely viewed positively by both parties. This period is later described as a *golden age* for higher education in England (Pratt, 1992, p. 36; Wynne & Dawson, 1975, p. 26). This *golden age's* byproduct, an effective higher education reform, was enabled by the political consensus mentioned earlier, reflecting a shared commitment across parties and the broader political atmosphere of cooperation and pragmatism following the war.

Economic Optimism: The Economic Conditions Enabling The Expansion Of Higher Education

The post-war period marked a time of economic prosperity for England, similar to that experienced by many other European countries and the United States. The concept of the "*welfare period*" is used to describe this roughly twenty-year economic boom beginning in 1950 (Bogdanor & Skidelsky, 1970, p. 11; Knight, 2006, p. 76). During this time, the purchasing power of the population increased dramatically, the variety of consumer goods expanded, and access to these goods became more widespread (Black, 2017, p. 7). This period signified a rise in the general economic well-being of the British population.

After experiencing the financial strain of two world wars, by 1945, England was in a weakened financial state. Despite this, the confidence gained from being a victorious power was evident across various sectors, particularly in the economy. Efforts were directed toward restructuring economic relationships to create a stronger financial system and economic growth. Both technological and industrial investments within the country and international trade relations were prioritized during this period, becoming key drivers of post-war economic development and recovery.

Although the United Kingdom did not join the European Economic Community (EEC) until 1973, it began to strengthen its trade relations with European countries after



1945. The international trade share of consumer goods such as food, textiles, technology, and heavy industry grew exponentially, bringing prosperity to the general population. The 1950s and 1960s saw the arrival of consumer goods such as automobiles, televisions, and refrigerators in homes across the country. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's famous 1957 statement "*British people had never had it so good!*" captured the iconic representation of this prosperous time (Knight, 2006, p. 43).

During this period, per capita income increased significantly (Lee, 1996, p. 196). Unemployment was at historically low levels, standing at just 1.2 percent—marking one of the lowest rates in British history; additionally, the number of people traveling abroad from the United Kingdom rose (Madgwick et al., 1982, pp. 66–67). This period signified an economically optimistic time, and the concept of *welfare* became central to post-war economic discourses. Terms such as "*welfare society*," and "*welfare state*" became key concepts used to describe this era.

This period of prosperity was accompanied by substantial investments in science, technology, education, healthcare, and social security. However, it is important to note that this economic boom did not resolve social inequalities. Social class divisions and economic disparities remained evident, even though the middle class expanded significantly during this period, while the proportions of the lower and upper classes declined (Madgwick et al., 1982, p. 35). As a result, average income and consumption patterns remained higher than they had in the past, creating new opportunities for long-term financial planning.

This economic optimism encouraged people to make investments in areas that were not limited to basic needs but also focused on future planning. Homeownership became more common, and many individuals began to invest in their long-term financial stability (Bogdanor, 1970, pp.55-57). These societal conditions likely contributed to a rise in spending on higher education, as parents became more inclined to support their children in pursuing higher education. This shift was not only a result of changing personal choices, but also of improved economic conditions, as providing financial support for university education required greater economic stability. The expansion of higher education was thus closely tied to this broader financial climate. As families' purchasing power increased, and optimism about future opportunities grew, higher education investments started to become a strategic choice for many families. These trends marked a shift in attitudes toward education, emphasizing long-term social and financial mobility through access to higher education.

From the government's perspective, the introduction of new higher education reforms, influenced by the *Robbins Report*, necessitated significant adjustments in budgetary planning and management. The *Robbins Report* outlined the need to

address growing higher education demand by proposing the establishment of new universities and granting university status to certain higher education institutions previously labeled as colleges. These changes symbolized a major state investment in higher education, reflecting the UK government's strategic priorities during this period. In the course of its efforts to maintain economic competitiveness, particularly in an era marked by post-war recovery and rebuilding, the British government viewed these long-term investments in higher education as an essential strategy. Prioritizing the development of skilled labour through higher education became a key part of this strategy. The need for a well-trained workforce was particularly significant as industrialization expanded, and technological innovation demanded new skills from the labour market (HMG, 1956).

Moreover, discussions about the *knowledge society* in the mid-20th century influenced governmental priorities by emphasizing the need to increase the number of educated citizens. These strategic priorities created a favourable political environment for allocating budgets to support higher education expansion. The financial optimism of the 1950s, stemming from stable economic recovery and prosperity, further enabled the UK government to commit substantial resources to this reform process. The *Robbins Report* which provided a blueprint for expanding access to higher education, improving institutional capacity, and aligning educational policies with national economic goals was the result of such a time of political stability and economic optimism—factors that supported effective policy implementation and long-term planning..

The political and economic stability of the post-war period created an environment that was more open to addressing social needs and inequalities. This period brought with it a growing emphasis on *social equality of opportunity*. Debates about achieving equality in areas such as health care, social security, and education came to the forefront. Among these, education became one of the most significant areas of focus (Anderson, 2006, pp. 141–143). Before the 1950s, access to both primary and higher education in the England was largely determined by socio-economic class. Certain schools and institutions were associated with specific social groups, and access to higher education opportunities was often limited for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This exclusion became a pressing political issue in the 1950s, as the new prosperity and rising expectations led to demands for higher education opportunities to be available to students from all socio-economic classes (Becher & Kogan, 1991, p. 28).

The improved purchasing power of many families created higher expectations for access to quality education. The Robbins reforms supported this shift by facilitating expanded opportunities in higher education and creating pathways to social mobility (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pp.7-8). These reforms were embedded in the belief that

equitable access to higher education would contribute to economic progress, technological innovation, and broader societal well-being. The economic recovery and social optimism of the 1950s paved the way for a transformative period in British higher education, with reforms not just aimed at addressing educational access but also at fostering a more equitable and prosperous society (Anderson Committee, 1960; Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 231). The expansion of higher education during this time was as much a response to economic opportunities as it was a social and political commitment to broader equality and opportunity.

Social Reconstruction: Changing Social Expectations and Demands

The post-war period, as in other countries involved in the war, becomes a period of reconstruction, recovery, renewal, and development for England as well. Particularly on the social sphere, the rebuilding of a war-damaged society, the restoration of self-confidence, and the search for new paths of economic growth and progress emerge as central themes. Although the war was fundamentally experienced as a destructive event for England, the fact that it emerged victorious contributed to bolstering societal self-confidence. This reconstruction process required a stable effort across various social domains; this became one of the prominent elements of England's social structure in the second half of the twentieth century.

Britain was criticized in the second half of the twentieth century for lagging behind Continental Europe and America in keeping up with certain economic and social developments. Studies mentioning comparisons with America and Continental Europe during this period highlighted that it was lagging behind in some areas such as education and economy (Crafts, 2018, 79; Lawlor, 1968, s. 33). Based on these comparisons, Britain was seen as engaging in efforts during the second half of the twentieth century to renew itself and elevate its position among peer countries. Thus, the second half of the twentieth century emerges as a period during which Britain re-evaluated its boundaries, capacities, and future projections.

This environment of reconstruction was distinctly felt in the social sphere. In particular, new activities shaped by economic prosperity and spread across the general population opened opportunities for the reshaping of social structures. The widespread ownership of cars among families led to the popularization of traveling; the standardization of having a television in every home meant that information and entertainment became more uniform across households (Salt & Elliott, 1975). Additionally, favourable economic and political conditions encouraged the younger generation to adopt apolitical and unconventional lifestyles, leading to increased diversity and dynamism within social structures

(Bogdanor & Skidelsky, 1970; Booker, 1969). Such a social environment fostered openness to innovation and change in all areas of society, questioning the old ways and rethinking fundamental values.

The demand for higher education to spread across the general population in the 1950s was also the result of the expectation that social class mobility could be achieved through education. Social movements such as the growing debates on gender equality, discussions on ethnic discrimination, and student activism during this period further supported the view that higher education should be accessible to all segments of society (Perkin, 1961). This societal expectation paved the way for the restructuring of higher education institutions so that they would cater not just to a select elite group but to the entire population. Additionally, it can be argued that the experience of war reinforced the idea of social equality of opportunity. The notion that war represented a shared experience of deprivation for large portions of the population and, in a sense, leveled different social groups, was reflected in studies suggesting that citizens became more demanding regarding equal rights in the post-war period (Filippakou & Tapper, 2019, pp. 17–21).

From the perspective of state policies, this period marks the influence of the welfare state concept and the beginning of a discussion regarding higher education demand no longer being viewed as a luxury but as a right. Although the idea that social equality could be achieved by increasing the number of students participating in higher education would gain prominence in the next decade, a similar trend began during these years (Crosland, 1965). The alignment of social equality with the concept of higher education access from the perspective of state policies highlighted the conditions that facilitated the effectiveness of new reforms in British higher education.

As expressed above, the re-evaluation, restructuring, and expansion of higher education institutions through a systematic and holistic approach occurred during a period when attitudes toward social reconstruction were becoming more widespread. For individuals enjoying greater economic prosperity compared to previous periods and maintaining an optimistic outlook for the future, higher education became a significant investment. During this process, the proportion of young people seeking higher education increased markedly (Anderson, 1992). This growing demand gave rise to the approach highlighted in the *Robbins Report* and later referred to as the “Robbins principle.” This principle states: “Higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.” (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8). The spread of demand for higher education across society can be understood as a result of the social reconstruction mindset that took shape in the 1950s.



The preceding sections have emphasized that political consensus, economic optimism, and the idea of social reconstruction were key elements defining the atmosphere of 1950s England. This historical context, in turn, acted as a catalyst for the transformation of higher education, the reorganization of higher education institutions under a new systemic and holistic approach, the establishment of new universities, and the widespread increase in demand for higher education across all social segments. This enabled the planning and implementation of effective higher education reforms. To further evaluate the relation between those, the idea of reform in higher education in England and the report that became the embodiment of new regulations will be mentioned in the following sections.

The Idea of Reform in Higher Education

After highlighting the dominant political, economic, and social features of post-war England in the previous chapter, this section will focus on the historical development of English higher education and the processes in the 1960s that emphasized the need for transformation. Thus, the historical background provided earlier will be connected to the higher education transformation process. This is because higher education institutions, which can be considered a product of the society from which they emerged, cannot be thought of independently of social statics and dynamics (Spencer, 1892).

In the previous chapter, when discussing England's historical process during the third quarter of the twentieth century, reference was made to themes such as political consensus, economic optimism, and social reconstruction. These themes brought about attitudes such as centralization, system-building, taking steps to ensure social equality of opportunity, and engaging in competition with peer countries in various areas. These attitudes also shaped the process of reconsidering higher education as a system.

After 1950, particularly during the following decade, the discourse and actions oriented toward social reconstruction in England, which developed in a climate of political consensus and economic optimism, began to extend into higher education. One of the first observations was that England was falling behind in higher education compared to continental Europe and America (Education UK, 1969). This realization made it necessary for England to reassess its higher education system. Considering that England has some of the world's oldest universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, it was unexpected that England would lag behind its peers in terms of expanding higher education and responding to contemporary demands.

By the 1950s, higher education access remained highly elitist in England. Higher education was largely limited to individuals from certain social classes, excluding others (Perkin, 1961, p. 11; Wynne & Dawson, 1975, p. 8).

However, following the social conditions expressed in the previous chapter, demand for higher education began to increase after 1950 (Carswell, 1986, p. 26; Neave, 1985; Shattock, 1996, p. 111-123). This rising demand necessitated the expansion of higher education institutions and their quotas, leading to discussions within government circles. From a state perspective, higher education was seen as a critical tool for competing with peer countries by training skilled labour and intellectual minds (Eden, 1956). This perspective would lead to the initiation of a higher education expansion process, aimed at both addressing rising demand and positioning England in line with its peer countries in higher education. This process would proceed continuously, aided by the climate of political consensus and despite changes in government.

It should be noted that the adjustments aimed at expanding higher education during this period were observed not only in England but also across Europe and America (Kaelble, 1990, pp. 36-37). This is because, in the second half of the twentieth century, similar socio-economic developments occurred throughout Europe, which brought about similar social demands (Kaelble, 1990, pp. 4-6, 154). One of the attitudes that can be linked to this trend is the expectation of ensuring social equality of opportunity. During this period, one of the most prominent areas of discussion regarding social equality was education. Efforts to improve the quality of pre-university education and initiatives to make access to university-level education easier came to the forefront during this process (Lawson and Silver, 1973, pp. 432-446).

This was a period when university-level education was undergoing massification across Europe and America, leading to an increase in the number of skilled workers and the proportion of higher education graduates in society. Similarly, in England, the increasing demand for higher education from society and the growing need for a skilled workforce on the part of the government led to the initiation of efforts to increase the number of higher education institutions (Pratt, 1992). The socio-economic and social conditions of this period, as mentioned above, gave rise to needs and expectations, one of which was the need to evaluate higher education as a comprehensive system, including various higher education institutions. The idea of organizing institutional structures in the post-war period as systematic, planned, and controllable entities gained importance. Steps were taken to ensure that the future trajectory of higher education would be implemented in a more systematic and planned manner (Stewart, 1989, p. 86).

When examining English higher education in the first half of the twentieth century, it becomes evident that various fragmented and independent institutions existed, with no common organizational principles, and that higher education institutions were insufficient in meeting societal expectations. Until the 1960s, higher education was highly fragmented, lacking standardized principles of operation,

and far from being systematic (Driver, 1972, p. 326). Therefore, the idea of approaching English higher education as a comprehensive system necessitated the establishment of a formal higher education system in the first place.

While universities are the institutions that are primarily associated with the concept of higher education in England, various higher education institutions with distinct functions also existed. By the 1950s, alongside universities, institutions such as Colleges of Education, Colleges of Advanced Technology, Regional Colleges, Area Colleges, and Local Colleges provided post-secondary education. During the post-war period, demand for universities increased significantly compared to other higher education institutions. Students began shifting toward universities to pursue advanced studies in arts, social sciences, and natural sciences rather than vocational institutions focusing on technical education and health services (Morgan, 2001, pp. 233-4; Taylor and Pellew, 2020, p. 376). As a result, the idea of establishing a comprehensive higher education system was accompanied by a plan that emphasized the prioritization of universities among these institutions. This change involved increasing the number of universities and their quotas, responding to the changing demand patterns and structural needs of higher education.

Universities, throughout English history, have essentially been institutions with the goal of fostering intellectual development, primarily offering education in disciplines such as history, philosophy, theology, and classics. These institutions have primarily focused on training intellectuals to meet societal needs, ensuring the effective transmission of cultural knowledge, and thereby maintaining the existing system (Halsey & Trow, 1971, pp. 32, 68). By the 1950s, as various higher education institutions began to take on similar roles to universities, the issue of how to systematize these institutions became a topic of discussion. Would the traditional ancient English universities inherited from the Middle Ages, the city universities established in the 1940s, the teacher training colleges, or the advanced technical colleges take on the leading role in higher education? Among these options, universities would emerge as the leading institutions.

Universities were the most prestigious segment of the higher education system in England; only graduates of grammar schools—schools catering to the most successful students—had the right to attend universities. In the 1954-55 academic year, the number of universities in the UK was 24, and a total of 82,000 students were enrolled in these institutions. This number represented 3.2% of all students pursuing post-secondary education at that time (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p.12). Because of these characteristics, universities were considered prestigious institutions of higher education accessible to only a small minority. Efforts to expand these elite institutions became a central element of higher education policies shaped by

the recommendations of the *Robbins Report*. The decision to increase the number of universities and their quotas, instead of focusing on vocational higher education institutions, can be seen as an approach made possible by the economic optimism of the post-war period. This is because expanding access to university education, rather than prioritizing immediate labour market participation, could only be achieved in an atmosphere shaped by financial well-being and positive expectations for the future.

Higher education institutions remained independent entities without central control until the 1950s. However, the post-war period brought about societal renewal across all areas, extending into higher education and highlighting the need for centralization and systematization in this sector, as well as emphasizing discussions on social opportunity equality and accessibility. This context marked the beginning of a process in which England demonstrated its resolve to comprehensively address higher education through necessary reforms. The Robbins Committee was established during this period to assess the current state of higher education and to propose recommendations for its improvement in the future.

The Establishment and Operation of the Robbins Committee

The committee officially known as the *Higher Education Committee* and informally referred to as the *Robbins Committee* due to its chairman's name, was established in 1961 with the aim of reviewing the current state of English higher education and planning the practices and reforms that would shape its future. The individual responsible for initiating the committee was Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister of the Conservative government at the time. The Prime Minister approached Lord Lionel Robbins, a prominent economist then working at the London School of Economics, with the proposal to lead this investigation into the state of higher education in the UK (Robbins, 1971, pp. 272-273). Thus, the committee was established on February 8, 1961, and its work concluded with the submission of its report to Parliament in October 1963.

This two-year period was marked by intense work on the part of the committee members, given the extensive scope of their responsibilities. The committee's primary objectives were to review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain, to develop principles for its long-term development, and to provide recommendations in line with national needs and resources (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. iii). However, these objectives brought many related issues into the committee's focus, including addressing the post-war increase in higher education demand, promoting equality of opportunity in education and social justice, expanding and democratizing access to higher education, training skilled labour to support the country's economic growth, designing an educational system that would align with industrial and



technological advancements, comprehensively reviewing and restructuring the current higher education system, planning the number and capacity of higher education institutions, and developing a long-term vision and strategy for the future of British higher education (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pp. 4-22).

The committee was tasked with evaluating all of these issues and making recommendations in response, while considering the changing social, economic, and technological conditions in England. As such, the report served not just as a written analysis of higher education but also as a document embodying the social, economic, and technological context of the era. To support its analysis, the committee commissioned numerous quantitative studies, even creating statistical data that had not previously existed. These data were presented in the form of tables and graphs in the final report, making the *Robbins Report* a valuable source of information on the UK at the time (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pp. xiv-xvi).

During the two-year research period from 1961 to 1963, the committee engaged in a comprehensive research and consultation process. The methods employed included data collection and analysis, numerous meetings and consultations with stakeholders, commissioning research studies, and conducting visits to various universities and colleges in both the UK and abroad. As a result of this extensive process, the committee concluded that the university sector needed to be expanded and proposed the principle that university places should be accessible to all qualified candidates based on talent and merit. The report called for the creation of new universities to meet growing demand and recommended the development of a more diverse system, with both traditional universities and newer institutions offering higher education. It emphasized the need for universities to be more closely aligned with national economic goals, stressing the importance of fostering skills and knowledge that would contribute to the country's economic development. Additionally, the report called for improved financial support for students and greater attention to the needs of adult learners and part-time students. This report ultimately shaped British higher education policy significantly during the period and has continued to exert influence since its publication.

The *Robbins Report* is still considered one of the most influential policy documents in British political history, even 62 years after its publication. It is frequently cited by higher education researchers due to its role as an effective reform initiative (Hillman, 2023; Moser, 1988; Niblett, 1981; Scott, 1988; Watson, 2014). The creation, implementation, and positive transformative effects of such a powerful document were made possible by certain historical conditions. This analysis suggests that reforms in higher education can only be effective when supported by specific political, economic,

and social conditions. From this perspective, it becomes possible to state that all forms of institutional reform occur within this broader contextual framework, and their success is closely related to these underlying conditions.

Conclusion

The higher education reforms in England, which gained prominence following the publication of the *Robbins Report* in 1963, emerged from the interplay of political, economic, and social factors. Motivated by concerns over economic competitiveness, social mobility, and the increasing demand for skilled labour in a rapidly modernizing society, the British government pursued a policy of widening participation in higher education. The acceptance of the report by the Cabinet led to a significant rise in university enrolments. As a result existing institutions expanded, and new universities were established to accommodate the growing student population. While this expansion improved access to higher education, it also introduced challenges, including the need for increased public funding and concerns over maintaining academic standards. In the long term, the *Robbins Report* set a precedent for state intervention in higher education planning, reinforcing the notion that higher education was not merely an elite privilege but a national investment essential for economic and social development.

During this process, political consensus fostered public willingness for reform while enabling the government to implement policies with minimal resistance. Additionally, the prevailing economic optimism strengthened the state's commitment to investing in the education sector, while the dominance of the idea of social reconstruction further reinforced efforts to reduce educational inequalities and enhance social mobility. Collectively, these factors encouraged institutions to adopt more flexible structures, facilitating the expansion of higher education and its accessibility to broader segments of the population. Societal support, coupled with financial commitments embedded within state policies, sustained the determination to pursue reforms despite opposition from interest groups such as traditional universities and political conservatives. As a result, the combination of these forces not only ensured the successful implementation of the 1960s reforms but also led to a lasting transformation in the structure and accessibility of higher education in England, driving increased demand for universities and promoting greater equality of opportunity in education.

This study identifies political consensus, economic optimism, and social reconstruction as the primary historical factors that shaped and ensured the effectiveness of the higher education reforms in England during the 1960s. The interplay among these elements accelerated the reform process and enhanced their effectiveness. The interplay of these three factors enabled the successful planning and implementation of higher education

reform and facilitated the expansion of higher education. Furthermore, this dynamic did not only pave the way for the reforms of the 1960s but also played a decisive role in shaping England's higher education structure, which has endured to the present day.

Understanding these historical factors allows for a deeper comprehension of contemporary reform processes. Analyzing how past factors interacted to bring about systemic changes offers important perspectives for predicting how future educational reforms may evolve. Recognizing the dynamics behind higher education reforms is essential for developing sustainable and inclusive higher education policies that can effectively respond to emerging challenges in a rapidly evolving context.



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