

27.3.2026

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**Title**

Robbins, the binary policy and mass higher education / Peter Scott

**Publication year**

2014

**Source/Footnote**

In: Higher education quarterly. - 68 (2014) 2, S. 147 - 163

**Inventory number**

36269

**Keywords**

Ausland : Großbritannien : Hochschulwesen allgemein ; Hochschule und Staat : allgemein

**Abstract**

The Robbins report published half a century ago in 1963 has overshadowed all subsequent reports on the reform of higher education. A large part of its significance was that it made the case for expansion and therefore set higher education in the United Kingdom on the road to become a mass system.

However the committee's recommendations for the future structure of the expanded system appeared to be quickly contradicted by the introduction of the binary policy and the creation of the polytechnics by Crosland, Secretary Of State for Education and Science in the incoming Labour government. Only in the 1990s, was the Robbins path resumed when the binary policy was abandoned. However, an alternative account is possible, which argues that the differences between Robbins and Crosland have been exaggerated. Both Robbins and Crosland believed that the future system should be dominated by large, comprehensive and multi-faculty institutions. Only now are the fundamental ideas of Robbins being challenged: first, as the idea that there should be a 'system' of higher education is being eroded by the introduction of a 'market'; and, second, as the parallel idea that any system should be essentially 'public' is being undermined by the drive towards privatisation. (HRK / Abstract

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