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Framing higher education: questions and responses in the British Social Attitudes survey, 1983–2010

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This article focuses on questions and attitudes towards higher education in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey series. First, we analyse the changing BSA questions (1983–2010) in the context of key policy reports. Our results show that changes in the framing of higher education questions correspond with changes in the macro-discourse of higher education policies. Second, we focus on the 2010 BSA survey responses to investigate how attitudes towards higher education are related to respondents' characteristics. Respondents' socio-economic position predicts attitudes towards higher education. Graduates and professionals are most likely to support a reduction in higher education opportunities, but those who have so far benefitted least from higher education are supportive of expansion. One interpretation – with potential implications for social mobility – is that those who have already benefited from higher education are most inclined to pull the ladder up behind them.

Keywords: higher education; access; attitudes; social class; survey questions; public policy

1. Introduction

Higher education is viewed by both the public and policy-makers as an important route to upward social mobility (for example, Milburn 2012).¹ We use the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey as a lens through which to view policy changes and map attitudes towards higher education. From a policy perspective, opportunities to fulfil one's potential, for example through education, need to be open and fair (National Equality Panel 2010, 4). Public perception, as documented in responses to surveys such as the BSA, considers a good education fundamental to personal achievement.

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Indeed, 72% of BSA respondents in 1987 and 74% of respondents in 2009 thought education was essential or very important in 'getting ahead'.² Overall, education ranked second only to hard work, which was selected by 84% of respondents in both years (Heath et al. 2010).

The BSA survey series began in 1983. With the benefit of hindsight, the early 1980s can be characterised as a relatively stable time in higher education policy. The major expansion of the higher education system following the Robbins Report (1963), and the founding of the Open University in 1969, had already occurred. The division between polytechnics and universities remained, with the debates that would lead to the end of this divide in 1992 still some years away. This stability contrasts with the more rapid policy developments in higher education in the 1990s and 2000s, which saw the change from a free-tuition, grant system to an upfront tuition fee system (1998), then to higher deferred tuition fees (2004) and, finally, to fees of £9000 per year (2012) accompanied by a return to bursaries and a strong discourse of social mobility through higher education access (Milburn 2012).

We elaborate on the changing higher education policy context in England in Section 2 of this article, which is followed by a description of our research methods and hypotheses. We then analyse how changing policy discourses were mirrored in the framing of survey questions on higher education in the BSA. Furthermore, we investigate the link between current attitudes towards higher education and respondents' social position. Our combination of a linguistic content analysis of survey questions with statistical analysis of the responses allows us to bring together reflexive and empirical insights and recognises that changes in respondents' answers are in part constructed by the changing questions posed to them.

2. Higher education in England: the changing policy context

The post-war era has been characterised by expansion in student numbers, structural changes and changing funding regimes. A summary of the key changes to English higher education since Robbins is provided in Table 1.

The first notable shift in post-war English higher education was from an elite to a mass system with 3% enrolment prior to the Second World War (Halsey 1988, Table 7.2) to 7.2% in 1962 and steadily increased to reach 47% in 2010 (Department for Business, Information and Skills 2012, 2). The expansion began following the 1961 review by Lord Robbins, which established 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*' (Robbins 1963, 2:31). The principle is a classic meritocratic statement in the sense that academic ability and potential rather than other factors – such as occupational and socio-economic status – should influence opportunities for higher education (see, for example,

Table 1. Key publications and dates in English higher education, 1963–2013.

Year	What?	Impact
1963	Robbins Committee Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triggering higher education expansion • ‘Robbins Principle’ established that university places ‘should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment’
1965	Binary system introduced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education system split into universities and polytechnics
1969	Open University founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to bring high-quality degree-level learning to people who had not had the opportunity to attend traditional campus universities • First successful distance learning university worldwide
1992	Further and Higher Education Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polytechnics and colleges incorporated as universities (end of binary system) • Attempt to create a comprehensive (unitary) university system
1998	Teaching and Higher Education Act (following Dearing Report of 1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means tested up-front tuition fees of £1000 introduced • Living cost maintenance grants replaced by loans
2003	White Paper: ‘The Future of Higher Education’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target to increase higher education participation, to re-introduce grants, and to abolish up-front fees • Recommends Access Agreements to improve access for disadvantaged students
2004	Schwartz Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five admissions principles established, including selection on ability and potential
2004	Higher Education Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of variable fees (£0–3000) • Up-front fees replaced by income-linked deferred payment. • Establishment of Office for Fair Access
2/-11	White Paper ‘Students at the Heart of the System’(based on Browne Review of 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variable fees of up to £9000 per year introduced • Universities charging fees of over £6000 per year required to contribute to a National Scholarship programme • Sanctions for not meeting widening participation targets • Threshold for loan repayment increased from £15,000 to £21,000. • Part-time students become eligible for loans • Upfront government loans for fees and maintenance • Means tested grants for students from lower income families

Habermas 1976). Following Robbins, universities became less a preserve of the select elite and more a route for upward social mobility. Hindsight shows again that the expansion of higher education during the 1960s coincided with increased 'room at the top' and absolute upward social mobility, thus arguably hiding continued difference in relative upward mobility chances (for example, Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). Wider access to higher education was seen as an integral part of this opening up of social opportunity and the Open University was founded in this spirit in 1969.

The second landmark report, the Dearing Report of 1997, and the subsequent Teaching and Higher Education Act of 1998 introduced tuition fees and student loans while simultaneously abolishing grants. This marked a return to 'ability to pay' being a criterion for university admissions rather than the meritocratic Robbins ideal of ability to benefit.

Support for tuition fees came from the political right as well as from the political left. Higher education was increasingly regarded as having significant private benefits and economic returns in addition to public benefits (Dearing 1997, 90). Furthermore, England – even in the 2000s – did not have free universal childcare in the early years. A left-wing critique of free higher education was thus that it was a 'middle class subsidy': a society that chooses not to afford free provision in education at a stage where every child is using it (during the early years) should not then publicly subsidise a service disproportionately used by the better off. Labour thus framed the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 in terms of social justice and a commitment to increasing the proportion of people participating in higher education.

However, once the principle of charging the individual was established, the level of cost that the individual was expected to shoulder escalated. Only six years after the first introduction of tuition fees and seven years after the Dearing Report, tuition fees were raised to £3000 (US\$5382). The payment mode changed from up-front fees to deferred payments in an attempt to mitigate against the drop in participation from those unable to afford up-front fees implied in charging for higher education. In 2012, following the Browne review, deferred, income-linked, variable fees of up to £9000 per annum (US\$16,146) came into effect (Browne 2010, 2).

Between Robbins in 1963 and Browne in 2010, the perceived balance between the public and private benefits of higher education has shifted greatly: from emphasising societal rewards towards emphasising private returns (for example, Marginson 2007; Calhoun 2006), and from an academically selective, elitist system with no financial barriers (Robbins Report) to a mass system with up-front tuition fees (Dearing Report). This shift has often been accompanied by further policies to mitigate against the unintended or most obviously 'anti-meritocratic' effects of moves towards privatising higher education, including the establishment of the Office for Fair Access in 2004. Meanwhile, access to higher education has been

highlighted in political discourse on social mobility, and research has shown continuing inequalities in access (for example, Sutton Trust 2005).

3. Data and methods

The annual BSA survey targets 3000 British respondents and tracks their social, political and moral attitudes. New questions are added each year to reflect current issues, but many questions are repeated periodically to chart shifts in attitudes over time. Elements of the survey are often funded by government departments with an interest in learning more about public perceptions of a particular area. Therefore, question batteries are routinely alternated, introduced or removed as policy contexts change.

We analyse the BSA data in two ways. First, we provide a linguistic content analysis of the changing BSA questions over time. Second, we analyse the BSA responses over time, and the social basis of responses in the 2010 survey.

We reviewed the survey items using the BSA information system site.³ Using the key search terms ‘higher education’, ‘university’ and ‘social mobility,’ we identified relevant key questions that were asked in different years. We then undertook a linguistic analysis of the questions considering the words used, the framing, and implicit assumptions within the questions. We analysed the characteristics of questions that were dropped from the survey and those of newly introduced items.

Social mobility and widening educational opportunity are usually portrayed as universally positive in public discourse, but both processes have winners and losers. We investigate whether this is reflected in the social and political basis of support for propositions regarding higher education policies that may be regarded as widening opportunities and providing routes to social mobility. We use simple descriptive techniques to show differences between groups, supplemented with multivariate analyses (logistic regression) to address questions regarding the independent significance of each of our predictor variables. The variables we use in these analyses are as follows:

- *Gender*: women tend to support welfare states including educational provision more strongly than men (Pratto et al. 1997), and we hypothesise that this will be reflected in the BSA responses.
- *Social class*: working-class political movements have traditionally supported free education and the expansion of educational opportunities, and we hypothesise that this will be reflected in the class basis of responses to the BSA questions. However, the converse hypothesis is suggested by arguments that it is the middle classes who benefit disproportionately from subsidised higher education. We use the three-category version of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification schema, which is an occupational schema, and determines class position

in terms of employment relations. It reflects not just income, but longer term economic security, stability and prospects, determined by a person's labour-market position (Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006).

- *Education*: responses from graduates may be expected to mirror those for respondents with professional and managerial jobs, as education and class status are linked. However, our multivariate analyses will partial out whether, once class is controlled, highly educated respondents are more or less likely to support increased educational opportunities.
- *Private schooling*: this variable indicates whether the respondent or a family member has ever attended a private school. We hypothesise that respondents whose families use private schooling will express lower levels of support for state provision.
- *Children aged under 16 in the household*: rational choice theory suggests that political views should be largely determined by private interests (Hindess 1988). In this case, people with children under 16 years old should be relatively likely to support state subsidies for education and widening opportunities.

We are interested in the relationship between party affiliation and attitudes because of the salience of higher education in the previous election. Although the Conservative and Labour parties had similar policies on higher education going into the 2010 general election, with only the Liberal Democrats taking a distinctive anti-fees stance, we hypothesise that the views of Labour supporters will be relatively favourable to expanding educational opportunities. We operationalise political affiliation using respondents' self-classified support for a particular party.

4. Surveying British attitudes to higher education: questions and responses in the BSA

In this section, we draw on the questions asked in the BSA series between 1983 and 2010 to carry out a content analysis of the surveys and note changing patterns in responses. By deconstructing the survey questions themselves, we investigate how the framing of questions towards different aspects of higher education has shifted over time. We also explore how answers correlate with the changing political and policy context.

The first question we examine appeared in the 1983, 1985, 1987 and 1990 surveys: 'When British students go to university or college they generally get grants from the local authority. Do you think they should get grants as now, or loans which would have to be paid back when they start working?' In each of the four surveys, the majority answer was 'grants'. And surprisingly, in each survey the proportion of respondents giving this answer increased (from 57% in 1983 to 71% in 1990). This question, however, was dropped from the BSA survey after 1990.

Similarly, when asked whether students should contribute to their degree or the local authority pay the full amount, a majority of respondents chose the latter. Again, the trend was against students being charged: when the question was last asked, in 1995, the proportion in favour of a student contribution fell 3% on the previous year, to just 25%.

Not all 'disappearing' questions were excluded from the BSA survey permanently. Some formed part of early surveys, then stopped being used for a while before re-emerging in 2010, by which time public opinion had often shifted. For example, in 1995, 1999, 2000 and 2010, respondents were asked about student loans. In the first three of those surveys, the proportion of respondents who believed that students should be expected to take out a loan was between 26 and 31% (with a fall of 2% between 1999 and 2000). However, when the question re-emerged in 2010, this figure had jumped to 43%. Likewise, between 2003 and 2004, an increasing majority of respondents (64% and 67%) felt that tuition fees for all universities and colleges should be the same. When the question was re-introduced in 2010, however, this figure had fallen to 57%. And finally, across the same three years, a similar pattern emerged for variable tuition fees by subject (53%, 56%, 46%). It is interesting to note that fewer respondents objected to fees varying by subject than by institution; however, the key finding is that public attitudes shifted during the latter half of the decade, with the 2010 survey being the first to show public attitudes warming towards student loans and variable fees. Support for maintenance grants did not diminish greatly over the same timeframe. In 2000, the proportion of respondents saying that all or some students should receive grants was 94%; in 2010, it was 92%.

In the early 2000s, a question was included in three surveys about whether tuition costs should be repaid by graduates. Respondents could choose whether all students, some students or no students should make repayments. The proportion of those saying that all students should make repayments was 18% in 2000, 16% in 2001 and 15% in 2003. The downward trend is interesting as this was the period in which tuition fee repayments (as opposed to upfront fees) were being introduced.

In 2002 and 2003, respondents were also asked how important it was that more people from working-class backgrounds went to university. The proportion of those feeling it was 'not very' or 'not at all' important fell fractionally during the two years and did not exceed 19% in either survey. When asked in 2002 whether universities did enough to encourage working-class young people to study there, only 34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. The question was not asked again. Indeed, support for widening access was very notable in the BSA surveys of the early 2000s, and it is interesting to note the (admittedly very small) shift towards more progressive and inclusive responses during this period in which fees stood at £1000 but were about to rise to £3000.

In terms of the language used to frame the surveys, we first find that, until recently, it was common for questions to lead the respondent to think about higher education in a positive, progressive light. For example, in 2001, respondents were asked: whether older people should be able to go to university as easily as younger people, how important it is to give older people financial help, and whether university prepares people for the world of work. Also, as noted above, in 2002 and 2003, respondents were asked how important it is for working-class people to go to university.

Strong elements of presupposition are encoded in each of these questions. Within the field of linguistics, and pragmatics in particular, a presupposition is an implicit assumption that is taken for granted within the discourse. Two of the questions listed above, like many others in early BSA surveys, favour a 'how important is it for X to do Y' structure. This structure assumes that some degree of importance is present. In pragmatics, 'important' is said to be the unmarked antonym because it is less conspicuous than its unmarked partner, 'unimportant' (Jones 2002, p. 15). However, most linguists accept that the unmarked term still guides the listener/reader towards agreement with the proposition (Levinson 1983). Therefore, in asking how important it is for working-class people to go to university, the BSA question is implicitly assuming that respondents will indeed attach *some* degree of importance to the proposition. Note also that the question refers to 'working class people', not the 'disadvantaged' or 'non-traditional' applicants, terminology that Burke (2012) connects to 'deficit assumptions'.

It is also interesting that agree/disagree questions, such as 'older people should be able to go to university as easily as younger people' were formulated as a positive statement in the early 2000s. Instead of university entrance for mature students being constructed as a financial burden, or even a societal inequity, the statement is presented in terms of citizens' right. To reject the statement is to discriminate against older people. This does not necessarily make this, or any of the other questions, 'leading'; rather, the constructions reflect societal norms during a period in which the importance of university, and the entitlement of all people to participate, was more widely accepted.

Shortly after these questions were dropped from the BSA survey, however, a different kind of linguistic structure began to be favoured. For example, in both 2005 and 2010, respondents were asked to respond to 'a university education just isn't worth the amount of time and money it usually takes', a statement that presupposes a university degree is both lengthy and expensive. By also presenting the statement in negated form ('*not* worth the time and money'), an implicit assumption is made that participation is not of value. In order to be positive about higher education, the respondent must actively disagree with the proposition, as it is framed by the questioner.

Note also that in 2005 two new questions appeared about voluntary donations by graduates to university, with only 34% agreeing or strongly agreeing that alumni ought to do this, but 23% saying that they themselves

would never donate, even if approached directly and able to afford it. A contrast is observable with earlier BSA questions, which tended to focus on values and fairness, rather than inviting individualised judgements.

As these questions indicate, 2005 saw the introduction of BSA questions relating to graduate employability. This included a statement to which the responses over time warrant close consideration: ‘A university degree guarantees a good job’ (see Table 2)

This question was posed in 2005 and 2010 and, at first glance, the distributions of answers could be seen as evidence that people are increasingly worried about the graduate job market: agreement is rising and disagreement falling. However, the data could be interpreted from a different angle, especially in light of the verb chosen for the statement. If taken literally, it is difficult to imagine any qualification ‘guaranteeing’ a good job. Had the BSA used less absolute construction, such as ‘a university degree *improves the chances of getting* a good job’ or ‘a university degree *often leads to* a good job’, responses may have been different. The selection of ‘guarantee’ invites rejection of the statement, again pushing respondents towards thinking of higher education as a private, not public, good and questioning its value even within an individualised, consumerist framework. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that only 41–42% of respondents actually disagree (or strongly disagree) with the statement. Given the unqualified way in which the proposition is expressed, one might expect positive support to be very limited. In fact, the distribution of responses suggests that some respondents have refused to be literal-minded in their interpretation of the question – in effect answering a different question from the one set. This makes any substantive interpretation of the responses problematic.

Indeed, evidence of belief in the value of higher education is widespread in the BSA results. Note the distribution of answers for the question about optimum numbers of university participants, as asked in the 2010 survey (see Table 3).

Interestingly, the desired proportion of young people that respondents would like to see enter higher education actually exceeds current numbers. In total, 129 respondents’ answers fell in the 31–40% bracket, the range at which participation actually lay in 2010. For every respondent who indicated

Table 2. Responses to the question ‘a university degree guarantees a good job’.

	2005 (%)	2010 (%)
Agree strongly	3	2
Agree	32	29
Neither agree nor disagree	23	27
Disagree	35	35
Disagree strongly	6	6

Note: Responses in column per cent.

a preference for participation below this level, 3.25 participants wanted the proportion to be higher. This kind of support for mass higher education is rarely reflected in media discourse.

Recent BSA surveys also show that participation is indeed considered highly beneficial to young people. Fewer than 7% of respondents in 2010 disagree or disagree strongly that it is important for a young person to go on to a university or college, and fewer than 9% feel the government spends much, or much too much, on higher education.

In terms of the affordability of university, respondents grew more concerned about the costs of higher education between 2005 and 2010 even though fees rose only in line with inflation. The proportion of those agreeing or strongly agreeing with the negatively phrased statement ‘the cost of going to university leaves many students with debts that they can’t afford to repay’ was 77% in 2005 and 79% in 2010. The proportion of those disagreeing or strongly disagreeing was 10% in 2005 and just 8% in 2010. This is strong evidence that the public were not reassured by the abolition of upfront fees or the introduction of a repayment schedule that did not begin until the graduate earned £15,000 or over per year. On the other hand, as noted earlier, a majority of respondents in both 2005 and 2010 rejected the idea that a university education is not worth the amount of time and money it usually takes (55% and 51%, respectively). This suggests that the British public simultaneously hold the view that the financial cost of participating is too high and that participation is still worth the investment of time and money. This could be interpreted as evidence of an awareness of higher education as a public good. Note also that in 2010 only 7% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘There are more advantages to a university education than simply being paid more’.

Table 3. Responses to the question: ‘Out of every 100 young people in Britain, how many do you think should go on to a university or college?’ (BSA 2010).

Answer	Frequency (%)
No young people should go on to higher education	0
Between 1 and 10%	1
Between 11 and 20%	6
Between 21 and 30%	11
Between 31 and 40%	15
Between 41 and 50%	16
Between 51 and 60%	17
Between 61 and 70%	10
Between 71 and 80%	9
Between 81 and 90%	3
Between 91 and 100%	4
All young people should go on to higher education	0
Don’t know	6
Refusal	1

Finally in this section, it is interesting to note the BSA's 'disappearing' questions. These include a question related to perceived bias in higher education admissions, which was included in the 2002 and 2003 survey but has not appeared since:

Suppose two young people with the same A/A2-level (or Scottish Higher) grades apply to go to university. One is from a well-off background and the other is from a less well-off background. Which one do you think would be more likely to be offered a place? (see Table 4).

Given the rise of the Widening Participation agenda in the last decade, and the attention increasingly paid to fairness in UK higher education admissions processes (Moore et al. 2013; Hoare and Johnston 2011), it may seem surprising that the BSA survey did not persist with direct questions such as this. Responses from 2002 and 2003 clearly indicate a perceived lack of equity in how the two hypothetical applicants would be treated. Although over 40% of respondents believe that no bias would arise, a slightly higher proportion anticipated unequal treatment. And where unequal treatment was anticipated, respondents were clear that it would be the 'well-off' candidate who would benefit (at a ratio of 21:1 in 2002 and 11:1 in 2003). This is in stark contrast to public discourses around the same time expressing concern that independent-school applicants would be disadvantaged by the use of contextual data (see Leathwood [2004] or the furore that followed Bristol University's policy to offer slightly lower grades to candidates from less advantaged schooling backgrounds).

In summary, early questions about widening access were arguably more explicit in early BSA surveys than in government policies or even public discourse at the time. It is possible that subsequent policies were based on the assumption that expansion would indeed widen access. However, later BSA questions placed much greater emphasis on the perceived negatives of expansion (devaluation of degrees, greater competition in the graduate market, student debt, etc.) than on possible benefits to the individual or to society.

Table 4. Responses to the question: 'This question is about two young people with the same A/A2-level (or Scottish Higher) grades applying to go to university. One is from a well-off background and the other is from a less well-off background. Which one do you think would be more likely to be offered a place at university?'

	2002 (%)	2003 (%)
Well-off person	42	43
Less well-off person	2	4
Equally offered place	43	41
Can't choose	9	9
Not answered	1	1

5. British Social Attitudes survey responses

We now turn to the analysis of responses to selected BSA questions over time and to associations between attitudes towards higher education and the social position of respondents to the 2010 BSA survey (National Centre for Social Research 2010). We chose the 2010 survey because it is relatively current but also because it included a specific battery of questions on higher education. These questions concerned university funding, including issues such as tuition fees, maintenance grants and loans, as well as probing attitudes towards participation and the value of university education. The greater number of questions about higher education in recent BSA surveys itself indicates the public salience of these issues in the context of the introduction of tuition fees. The 2010 survey was carried out just before the government confirmed the raise in tuition fees to up to £9000.

First, we look at trends over time. Second, we analyse differences in attitudes according to social status and political affiliation. We explore responses to the following question: 'Do you feel that opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education – to a university or college – should be increased or reduced, or are they at about the right level now?' When respondents answered increased or reduced, they could further specify whether this should be by 'a lot' or 'a little'.

We categorised the answers as follows: 'increased' (which includes 'increased a lot' and 'increased a little'); about right; and 'reduced' (which includes 'reduced a lot' and 'reduced a little'). In 2010, 35% of respondents thought opportunities for higher education should be increased, 46% thought opportunities were 'about right' and 16% wished to see opportunities reduced.

Looking at overall trends, we note that between the start of the BSA surveys in 1983 and 2010 a growing minority of respondents thought that the number of students going into higher education should be reduced. This group was around 5% of respondents in 1983 but tripled to more than 16% in 2010. The most frequent response throughout the period (with just under 50% of respondents) was that the number of people going into higher education was 'about right'.

Responses to the BSA have also tracked the actual policy trends in higher education. When asked whether students should be expected to take out loans, fewer than one-third of respondents (27%) supported this proposition in 1995. In 2010 this had become the most common answer, with 43% supporting the idea. The increased acceptance may reflect the political reality of student loans in the post-1998 student loan era.

Perhaps even more illuminating from a sociological perspective than the frequencies and changes over time is the social basis of support. Table 5 shows that those in favour of reducing higher education opportunities are disproportionately male, from the professional and managerial class,

educated to degree level or above, private school graduates, Conservative voters, and those without children in the household.

We use multivariate analysis to test the relative impact and statistical significance of these different predictors. We use multivariate logistic regression, which allows more than two discrete outcome categories. We model the predictors of responding that educational opportunities should be increased or decreased compared with the reference category of ‘just right’. This allows us to highlight ‘asymmetrical’ patterns of response; that is, where the social basis of support for a policy is not merely a mirror image of the social basis of disagreement. For example, the first four columns of Table 6 show a strong pattern among those who are against a reduction in higher education opportunities, but we do not find an equally strong pattern of support for expansion.

Table 6 shows regressions modelling for the responses to three separate items: ‘Opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education – to a university or college – should be [increased/reduced/are about right]’; ‘A university degree guarantees a good job’ [agree/disagree/neither agree nor disagree]; and ‘University education is not worth the time and money it usually takes’ [agree/disagree/neither agree nor disagree].

The first four columns in Table 6 relate to the first question above. The findings replicate the findings from Table 5, showing that men were statistically significantly more likely than women to think opportunities for higher education should be reduced. This is interesting as women increasingly outperform men in educational attainment and participation (Department for Business, Information and Skills 2012). There were no statistically significant gender differences in support for increasing higher education opportunities.

Graduates were both less likely to support an increase in opportunity and also more likely to support a reduction in opportunities. In some respects, this finding is counter-intuitive. One might expect those respondents who had themselves benefited from higher education to value it most. However, as we will discuss later, self-interest might play a role as graduates seek to secure their advantage in the employment market and perhaps feel they have the financial clout to afford their offspring similar opportunities.

Similarly, those who had experience of private schooling – either themselves or in their families – were more likely to be in favour of a reduction and against an increase of higher education opportunities.

Finally, we examine how attitudes towards higher education varied by party affiliation. Compared with Conservative Party supporters, both Labour and the Liberal Democrat supporters and those with no party affiliation were more likely to be against a reduction in higher education opportunities. Labour party supporters were also somewhat more likely than Conservative supporters to favour an increase of opportunities, but Liberal Democrat and Conservative supporters were indistinguishable in their attitudes towards expansion in higher education.

Table 5. Attitudes towards higher education opportunities, by demographic characteristics.

	Higher education opportunities ...			Number of observations
	... should be increased (%)	... are about right (%)	... should be reduced (%)	
Sex				
Female	38	46	13	608
Male	34	46	19	473
Occupational status				
Professional / managerial	34	39	26	163
Intermediate	33	45	18	361
Working class	38	50	10	351
Missing	~	~	~	38
Qualification level				
Degree or higher	28	40	30	182
Below degree level	40	45	14	426
No qualifications missing	31	54	11	211
Respondent's schooling experience				
Only state school	38	47	13	952
Some private school	24	42	30	129
Child in the household				
Yes	42	45	12	377
No	32	47	18	704
Party identification (Conservative)				
Conservative	28	46	25	299
Labour	41	47	11	315
Liberal Democrat	39	42	16	138
Other, none, missing	39	46	12	329
All	35	46	16	913

Note: All percentages are weighted to take into account of sample biases. This is a requirement for the analysis of BSA data. However, the frequencies are raw frequencies representing the actual number of observations for each category. Analysis of valid responses only. Where rows do not add up to 100% this is due to missing data or no response.

Next we turn to the responses to the question about whether a university degree guaranteed a good job. Labour supporters were more likely than Conservative supporters to think that a university degree guaranteed a good job, and those with a child in the household were less likely than those without children to disagree that university education guaranteed a good job.

Table 6. Multinomial logistic regression models predicting attitudes towards higher education participation.

BSA question 2010	Opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education – to a university or college – should be ...				Whether a university degree guaranteed a good job				'University education is not worth the time and money it usually takes'					
	... increased	... reduced	... are about right	...	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	
Response category	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Omitted reference category, response variable														
Predictor (reference category)														
Intercept	-0.57	0.57	-1.95**	0.81	0.52	0.68	1.42**	0.64	-0.06	0.72	-1.18^	0.62		
Gender (female)														
Male	-0.17	0.15	0.53***	0.20	0.14	0.19	-0.03	0.17	0.71***	0.21	0.24	0.17		
Social class (intermediate)														
Professional	0.20	0.22	-0.15	0.26	-0.39	0.28	-0.02	0.24	-0.47	0.32	-0.05	0.25		
Working	0.16	0.17	-0.63***	0.25	-0.29	0.22	-0.28	0.21	-0.81***	0.25	-0.44**	0.20		
Qualification (some qualification)														
Degree	-0.36^	0.20	0.61***	0.24	-0.20	0.24	0.03	0.22	0.17	0.30	0.65***	0.24		
No qualification	-0.28	0.21	-0.45	0.29	0.13	0.28	0.36	0.26	0.82***	0.31	-0.13	0.26		
Children at home (now)														
Yes	0.00	0.16	-0.36	0.23	-0.29	0.20	-0.39**	0.19	-0.42^	0.23	-0.23	0.19		
Schooling (all state)														
Someone private	-0.48^	0.25	0.51**	0.25	0.05	0.28	-0.02	0.26	0.76**	0.33	0.51^	0.28		

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued).

BSA question 2010	Opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education – to a university or college – should be ...	Whether a university degree guaranteed a good job	'University education is not worth the time and money it usually takes'
Party identification (Conservative)			
Labour	0.31 [^] 0.19 -0.88*** 0.25	0.58** 0.24 -0.04 0.22	0.62** 0.27 0.73*** 0.22
Liberal Democrat	0.37 0.24 -0.55*** 0.30	0.30 0.29 -0.32 0.27	0.35 0.37 0.90*** 0.28
Other, none, Missing	0.16 0.19 -0.55*** 0.24	0.27 0.25 0.03 0.22	0.34 0.26 0.12 0.22
<i>N</i>	1049	907	886
Chi	135.587***	46.85**	112.01***
Df	28	28	28

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$, [^] $p < 0.10$. We also included the following response categories in the statistical model underlying the table: age and age squared, missing education information, and social class missing. None of the missing factors were statistically significant and are omitted from the table.

There were no significant differences in this model according to gender, social class or education.

Finally, we investigated responses to the negatively worded question about university pay-offs ('University education is not worth the time and money it usually takes'). We compare those who agree or agree strongly or disagree or disagree strongly with those who neither agree nor disagree.

Our analysis shows that men are more likely to think that university is not worth the time or money. Working-class respondents were relatively unlikely to agree and also likely to disagree that university is not worth the time and money. Having a degree is associated with disagreement with the statement that university is not worth the time and money. Those respondents with children at home agree less often that university is not worthwhile – and those who went to private school are more likely to agree than those who went to state school. Finally, Labour supporters are most likely to have an opinion, positive or negative, regarding the value of university, while both Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters are more likely to disagree with the negative statement regarding the value of higher education than Conservatives.

6. Discussion and conclusion

We have shown how the discussion of higher education funding and benefits shifted between the Robbins, Dearing, and Browne reports, with increasing emphasis placed on the private rather than public benefits of higher education. The Browne report in particular introduced new elements of marketisation into higher education (Mountford-Zimdars and Teulon, forthcoming 2014). Simultaneously, there has been an increasing focus on the widening participation agenda in higher education, linking this to discourses regarding social mobility.

We investigated how the changing public discourse surrounding higher education has been reflected in changed formulations of BSA survey questions over time. Our linguistic content analysis of the BSA questions illustrated how changing social and political discourses and realities determine the questions posed by researchers as much as they determine public responses to them.

The early BSA survey questions tended to carry positive presuppositions, enquire about social justice, and assume that higher education was a public good rather than a private investment. However, in more recent surveys, cynicism about higher education expansion has crept into questions, with respondents being increasingly reminded of its expense and possible devaluation as a result of massification. Questions about fairness in the admissions process have largely disappeared.

Ironically, our analyses have shown that responses to the questions neither reflect nor justify the shift in their content and tone. Despite higher education increasingly being presented in negative light, respondents still seem able to recognise its value. Even when presented as a private good, respondents remain aware of its public worth. This suggests that media discourses and also some aspects of the Browne report may not be an accurate reflection of how British society regards higher education.

In our empirical analyses of BSA questions on higher education in 2010, we found support for some of our hypotheses regarding self-interest and attitudes. Those who had themselves benefitted from a university expansion acknowledged that it had been worthwhile but opposed future expansion. Those who had attended private schools were generally also in favour of a reduction in higher education. Those with children at home were more hopeful that graduates would get a good job than those without children. However, the responses according to social class and educational qualification are more complex. On the one hand, people's attitudes reflect and reinforce the life-choices they have made. Working-class respondents are less likely to have a strong view on the actual value of a university education, perhaps because they have less personal experience of university and its benefits. Graduates thought that university was worth the time and money, whereas those with no qualifications disagreed. Many of the responses by social class and qualification status thus map onto the actual life-choices people made. Gendered attitudes to higher education expansion are also striking. Here, male respondents are significantly less positive about expansion or the benefits of higher education than female respondents. This is in line with our hypothesis, and these less positive male attitudes towards higher education may also be reflected in the lower levels of male participation in higher education.

Turning to the responses to attitudes towards expansion, it is striking that working-class respondents favour an expansion in university opportunities, whereas graduates strongly favour a reduction in opportunities. Working-class respondents might aspire for their children to have opportunities they themselves did not enjoy, whereas graduates are more in favour of pulling up the ladder behind them and decreasing opportunities.

This 'pulling up the ladder' argument is supported by the private school findings. Those who attended private schools are in favour of a reduction of university places and think that universities may not be worth the time and money. In line with our hypotheses, Labour supporters were more inclined to support an expansion of educational opportunities than Conservatives. Liberal Democrats' views were similar to those of Labour supporters.

Implications for social policy are not clear-cut. The BSA survey results indicate that, according to public opinion, higher education opportunities should be more widely available, and that the optimum proportion of young people attending university should exceed its current level.

Strikingly, to win the argument for a marketised higher education system, arguments supporting the higher education as a public good tend to be downplayed. Policy decisions therefore focus on ‘cost-sharing’ measures, invoking the assumption that public funding disadvantages lower earners because the (participating) middle classes must be effectively subsidised by the (non-participating) working classes. What this analysis of BSA data shows is that popular support for higher education expansion is not always dulled by such self-interest. Comparisons could be made with popular support in the United Kingdom for the National Health Service, which is not necessarily predicated on self-interest (i.e. whether the respondent is in need of treatment) but rather reflects a broader sense of communal good.

In conclusion, our paper highlights the widening gap between public and policy discourses regarding higher education and social mobility on the one hand, and public opinion on the other. Support for higher education as a public good and route to opportunity remains strong, especially among those who have so far benefited least.

Notes

1. These perceptions are supported by some, but not all, empirical evidence (for example, Stuart 2012; but see Lindley and Machin 2012; cf. Goldthorpe and Mills 2008).
2. The BSA survey question (asked in 1987, 1992, 1999, and 2009) was: ‘To begin with, we have some questions about opportunities for getting ahead ... Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life ... important is ... coming from a wealthy family? ... having well-educated parents? ... having a good education yourself? ... having ambition? ... hard work? ... knowing the right people? ... having political connections? ... giving bribes? ... a person’s ethnicity? ... a person’s religion? ... being born a man or a woman?’
3. See <http://www.britsocat.com>.

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