

WORSENING PLIGHT OF THATCHER'S BABES

This weekend it is my son's barmitzvah – or coming of age in terms of Judaism. Naturally I have been very reflective about the meaning of the past 13 years and what his future as an "adult" – or perhaps rather as a Jewish man – will be like. It has also made me think about the meaning of being a parent and especially being a Jewish mother. I have worried, and continue to worry, especially about his education and what he will grow up to be and do.

Certainly the past 13 years are nothing like I hazily anticipated they would be when he was born. Unlike his sister who was born less than 18 months later, he was not quite one of "Thatcher's babies". Born towards the end of the 1970s, I felt that he would have an exciting and rich future growing up in the 1980s and 1990s and later as an adult in the 21st century. I certainly did not anticipate the changes and cut-backs over the past ten years or so.

His life so far has not been as easy and rosy as I had vaguely hoped. I do feel guilty that I have not been able to devote myself to him and his education. Now that he stands on the threshold of adulthood – or at any rate, adolescence – I should no longer worry about devoting myself to supporting him in his school-work. However, the education reforms that have been introduced over the past few years have

brought more pressures and obligations on parents to be directly involved in their children's education. This seems to be particularly true of GCSE which he will soon embark on. Financially, our children's education is becoming more of a burden. And this will certainly not stop when his school education comes to an end. What will higher education be like in five or six years' time, when he, in all likelihood, will begin to consider it?

Dramatic changes in the form and characteristics of higher education have taken place over the past 13 years. Students now have to study in more constrained circumstances than they did. If current trends continue in five or six years' time resources will be impossibly tight, even for the children of relatively privileged parents.

I am already aware of the lack of resources for students from my work. Not only are we having to teach in increasingly straitened circumstances, moving from a rather selective to a much more mass education model, but our students now come with fewer resources at



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their disposal. This is both because of the kinds of students that we aim to attract and the recent changes in social security and housing benefits as well as the shifts from student grants towards student loans.

However, the government did recognise that these radical changes in the funding of "home" students on full-time courses might have a

deleterious effect on students' access to higher education. At the beginning of this last academic year, in addition to the introduction of student loans, the Government decided to allocate funds through the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) to use as access funds. The purpose was "to provide financial help to students where access to higher or further education might be inhibited by financial considerations, or where students, for whatever reasons, including physical or other disabilities, face financial difficulties".

Student loans are far less popular than access funds, which do not have to be repaid. By the end of the spring term at South Bank less than 700 formal applications had been processed for student loans out of a total of approximately 5,300 eligible students. A further 300 started the process of consideration for eligibility but have not progressed through to a formal application. In other words, far less than 20 per cent of students took up the government's scheme. Of course, we do not have any notion of how many students

continue to support themselves with private loans and so on.

However, more than double that number of applications were received for access funds: approximately 1,600 applicants. And almost two-thirds of the applicants were awarded some financial help. Thus more than a quarter of a million pounds was disbursed to students who were deemed to be in need. However, this was clearly only the tip of the iceberg for the number of requests for second payments remained disturbingly high.

Clearly an average payment of less than £300 is nowhere near enough to relieve the financial hardships that students studying in the inner city experience. The polytechnic aimed to target students who might be in particular difficulties such as self-financing students, those with childcare responsibilities, with high travel costs, in private accommodation, or with disabilities, or carers unable to take weekend or vacation work or those ineligible for student loans.

However, so far students who have applied have ranged across all these categories. It is obvious that students are already experiencing hardships which certainly seemed almost inconceivable not a decade ago. In another decade, if these trends continue, just what kinds of students will be able to study full-time in higher education?