

15 July 2001

Why Students and Their Parents Should Press for High University Fees

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It is vital for our country that the new Labour government move quickly to bring in high university fees. That would be efficient, fair, and above all good for students.

British parents themselves would be advised to press for realistic fees: nothing would improve higher education more. The watch-words for Mr Blair and this parliament should no longer be education, education, education. That did not work. Instead they should be quality, quality, quality.

To achieve this, piles of extra cash are needed in British higher education, and there is only one place to raise it. At the moment we have dragged quality into the wastebasket and are running our universities below the breadline. In a world where everyone accepts that education is more crucial than ever, government funding per student has, extraordinarily, been halved since the 1980s. How many businesses could stand that?

In simple consequence, most British universities are going bankrupt, having to slash back their standards, worsen class sizes, hire people who are less good, not paint their buildings, and do lots of other things that are not in the interest of students. We are destroying one of our greatest industries.

A few universities, like mine, survive by operating as highly entrepreneurial profit-making organisations – cross-subsidising their teaching activity. But most cannot.

The arithmetic is simple. A British university gets about 5000 pounds a year to educate an undergraduate. Yet look westwards. Top US universities are in another league: they have 20,000 pounds per year

to educate a student. After you discover that fourfold difference, things start to fall into place. The endless unfavourable comparisons in the newspapers between US and British universities will continue until this fundamental imbalance is put right. Britain cannot have first-class universities on fourth-class funding. It is failing in its attempt to try, and politicians just prefer to look the other way. There is little incentive for a politician to see powerful universities in a country: universities are expensive, elitist, difficult to control, and full of people who ask awkward questions and think the unthinkable.

The current British system is also unethical, because the beneficiaries of university education, the students, hardly pay anything. This produces a vast and barely discussed subsidy from the badly-off to the rich.

Every year, poor families contribute hundreds of pounds through their taxes to each undergraduate in Great Britain. That is immoral. A tiny minority of British people went to university. Even today, two-thirds of young people do not go into higher education. There is no reason why these people should pay the bills of university students. Remarkably, however, many left-wingers in Great Britain are under the impression that defending the lack of sensible university fees is somehow egalitarian.

Education should be free, is the rhyme of the day. That does not make sense. The fact that our students never ask themselves where the cash comes from, to run their lectures, is not a good excuse.

The often-repeated argument that educated Britons go on to pay lots of income tax, so should have their education subsidised by normal taxpayers, is wrong. Footballers, hairdressers, pilots and London cabbies also go on to pay taxes; yet we do not subsidise their training. The idea that we should pay for young men and women to go to university because they will later pay income tax is muddled logic.

Setting a reasonable level of fees to the students from well-off backgrounds, such as 7000 pounds year, would allow our taxpayers' money to be diverted to where it is really needed – a giant scholarship fund available to those whose parents have not got much

money to send them to university. That is what real left-wingers would be pressing for.

Universities desperately need cash now. They are crumbling – in all senses. Most people in Great Britain prefer to see their taxes spent on schools and hospitals and roads, so there is no long-run future in hoping the state will pick up the bill for universities. Unless students pay, the quality of our universities will simply fall and fall.

Already Britain is finding it hard to attract anyone into university teaching. The explanation is straightforward: the pay is awful, the regulation appalling, and the job hard. Yet it is in the clear interests of students that we be able to hire talented lecturers. You cannot run universities where the students are cleverer than the teachers.

British higher education needs more money, it needs it now, and it is only fees that will allow that. The same issues face public universities all over the world; the days of a plentiful supply of taxpayers' cash are ending. Those who benefit from something should pay the bills.

Students themselves would be the winners.

Quality, quality, quality.