

Ten Good Reasons Why University Tuition Fees Are A Bad Idea

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Tuition fees at public universities in England are now, on average, the highest in the world. The reform has already been judged by monitoring authorities to be a bankrupt idea. It is without question a rushed and ill-considered experiment, out of line with the policies of other Western democratic nations. The arguments against this high fees regime are many and various. This blog looks at the new system from different angles in order to show the impact it will have on individuals and on society as a whole, on universities and on the national economy, offering ten good reasons why university tuition fees are a bad idea.

Reason 6: Damage to University Finance

High tuition fees represent a false solution to the problem of funding an expanding university sector. Successive governments have shown little inclination to invest in universities in order to allow them recruit more widely and to compete globally. British universities are under-funded by international standards. The introduction of the revised loan system seemed to offer a more reliable and independent revenue stream and it is unsurprising that it has been welcomed by the majority of university Vice-Chancellors. But it is a historic injustice to address the shortfall in public funding by burdening the graduates of this and future generations with crippling levels of private debt, increasing stratification of the higher education institutions, and damage to social mobility.

Short-term gain for certain privileged institutions will be undermined for the sector as a whole by the unsustainable loan repayment mechanism and the competitive market model that accompanies it. The success of the British university system has been built on high levels of cooperation and collaboration. Public funding allows higher education to be treated holistically according to long-term objectives, rather than reducing universities to rival corporations. The market model according to which universities are forced to compete for student 'consumers' who cash in the 'vouchers' based on loans – is by contrast wasteful and chaotic. Universities are experiencing a huge diversion of effort and income into the provision of ever-more demanding standards of audit and information to service the 'consumer'. They must establish their 'brand' in the marketplace, or suffer the consequences. PR costs rose by 25% from 2009 to 2013. Opportunistic private providers stand to profit, as their students can now apply for government loans. Universities providing access to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, part-time students, and non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects stand to lose most.

The theory is that the market model will force down prices while raising quality. In this respect it has failed already; tuition fees are virtually identical across the board. To charge less than the £9000 maximum would be in effect to suggest that a university is offering a substandard product. Meanwhile, the government has imposed or lifted the 'recruitment cap' from year to year, creating shock waves in the system, forcing universities into rapid

reaction mode rather than careful planning, and encouraging the expansion of student numbers without the infrastructure to support them in terms of staff and housing. Elite universities bid for students with top grades, offering fee waivers and bursaries, expending precious resources on those who may need them least.

Sources

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