

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 7: Damage to University Culture

The market model of higher education, which situates students as 'consumers', creates false expectations for students and their families and does damage to the fabric of university life. Students are treated by the government as 'rational consumers,' buying a product on the basis of objective information with their £9000 p.a. tuition fees. Aside from the immorality of being asked to commit themselves to a lifetime of debt, school-leavers are being encouraged to believe that education is an economic exchange: they will receive a secure future with a 'graduate premium' (increased earnings) in return for cash payment. But education is not a commodity. Educational quality cannot be measured with perfect accuracy for statistics and league tables. Teaching and learning are a two-way process, and nowhere more so than at university, where students begin to acquire intellectual independence.

The application of consumerism to education distorts the student-teacher relationship. It elevates instrumental thinking and downgrades intellectual imperatives. Vocational programmes gain preference over a so-called 'liberal' education, without specific employment prospects. The government continues to provide direct grants for teaching in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths), and sends out directives to schools to steer sixth form pupils down this path, while the social sciences, humanities and arts are represented as relatively worthless spheres of interest, for the individual or for the state.

More broadly, 'student satisfaction' becomes a policy directive in addition to a marketing tool. This crude and superficial method of evaluation, usually based on questionnaires returned by a small percentage of the student body, can lead to decisions on the running of courses, the promotion of staff (or otherwise), and the distribution of resources within the institution. Peer review, by experts in the discipline becomes less influential. Increasing reliance on income which is determined by student choice means that research as well as teaching is damaged by the commodification of education.

The negative impact of the high fees regime on access and widening participation also has consequences for university culture. The system favours those with an economic advantage, which often translates into high scores at 'A' level. The fixation on 'A' level results leads to a lack of diversity, both in institutions and student intake. It is a skewed method of determining access, based on a restricted vision of the possibilities of university education.

Sources

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