

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 8: The Future of Universities in Question

The incentives for continuing to postgraduate study, in order to qualify for teaching in higher education, are rapidly diminishing. Increased levels of debt will be a major disincentive. Once, a first class degree would almost guarantee a grant to obtain Masters and PhD qualifications. Now government funding for postgraduates has almost disappeared. As a rule, only the rich can afford to do postgraduate study, not the best. Fees, which are rising to undergraduate levels, must be paid upfront and there has been no provision for maintenance loans. Postgraduate programmes have become increasingly dependent for their viability on overseas rather than home students.

The Browne report in 2010 was complacent about the problem. No plan was offered for financing postgraduate study, which was seen primarily as a private rather than a public benefit. This irresponsible approach led the British Academy early in 2011 to announce its concern over this 'timebomb for British research' and commission an inquiry into the effects of student debt on future postgraduate participation. By 2013 the coalition government had woken up to the consequences of falling numbers, and diverted funds from the National Scholarship Programme designed to support undergraduate access to create a postgraduate loan system. But how appealing will a doubling or tripling of their debt burden be to aspiring university professors?

Debt and the lack of funding are not the only disincentives. Once a PhD has been completed, those contemplating a career in higher education face, in many cases, years of struggle in a job market increasingly marked by the casualisation of work conditions, short-term contracts or teaching on hourly pay, while they seek a permanent post. It is generally only those with substantial family support who can wait it out.

Meanwhile, even among permanent academic staff there has been a gradual worsening of work conditions over the past ten years, coinciding with the raising of tuition fees in 2004, and involving a sharp increase in the demands of audits and marketing on top of the core duties of teaching and research. The University and College Union reported following a survey of work-related stress in 2014 that 'satisfaction with the quality of workplace relationships has reduced dramatically' since its previous survey in 2012. The profession is

experiencing the crushing burden of managerialism, made more acute by the market model of higher education.

Sources

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