

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 9: Against the National Interest.

The high fees regime will have consequences not only for individual graduates and their families and for universities, but for the nation as a whole. Aside from the long-term economic risks, the treatment of higher education as a private investment by undergraduates rather than as a public good will have profound consequences.

The connection between 'free' education and public service will be severed. Over 40% of graduates currently work in public administration, education and the NHS. The new pressure is to seek higher salaries in the private sector. Students are also being discouraged from choosing degrees in humanities and the creative arts, and the nation will lose incalculably in its quality of life.

To justify the value of universities on the basis of their contribution to the economy alone ignores other important measures of value. Stefan Collini, among others, has rightly spoken out against defending the arts and humanities on the grounds of utility. Humanities disciplines are a vital space for comprehending the past, debating the present and imagining the future. Yet funding for humanities research has been slashed. From 2013-14 there were reductions of 47% and 20% in funding of humanities masters degrees and doctoral research respectively. This cannot fail to have a huge impact both on access, and on the texture and quality of life in this country. As Sophie Coulombeau, graduate of an MA in Eighteenth-Century Studies and now a novelist, has argued, learning in the humanities 'fortifies our society like a subliminal layer of muscle and tendon. We seldom see it but by god, we will miss it when it's gone.' Like the NHS and the BBC, the universities of this country are a national treasure, not merely mechanisms for economic growth.

Yet even in terms of the economic arguments the government prefers, it is clear that the new regime is failing when it comes to the national interest. School-leavers have been told by the government that attendance at a university will bring a significant 'graduate earnings premium,' with a degree ensuring a higher salary. A 2014 study shows that instead this margin is diminishing. Starting salaries for graduates have declined by an average of 11% since 2007, even in well-paid jobs in medicine and dentistry. In 2015 the majority of

graduates were found to be working in 'non-graduate jobs,' for which a degree was not required.

In the context, it would be no surprise if many graduates decided to emigrate. The government has no provision for recouping loans from abroad. Graduates who move abroad will simply fall out of repayment system. The numbers doing so currently stand at around 2%, already representing loans worth £400m, and this can only rise given the shortage of skilled jobs in the UK, and the far higher levels of personal debt.

Sources

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