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English Higher Education: fees are only the half of it!

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ABSTRACT Tertiary-level educational provision is being increasingly fragmented by government policies, with malign consequences for students and institutions. As currently constituted, higher education works to entrench inequalities and devalue qualifications, while bipartisanship around the future of further education risks reprising past failures. What is needed is to replace market-driven expansion and competition with regional cooperation in order to reintegrate the system and rediscover the purpose of education at tertiary level. An expectation of, and an entitlement to, local/regional adult further and higher continuing education should be integral to school leaving. The system should be founded on a common general but not academic schooling up to age 18, linked to the assumption of democratic citizenship.

Introduction: are high fees inevitable?

It was anticipated that Labour would announce a reduction of undergraduate student fees to £6000 at its last party conference, but it didn't. The National Union of Students wants fees phased out, as in Germany and other European countries. Higher education (HE) unions officially agree but many HE staff are ambivalent because the money that now comes with students would have to be made up centrally (and it's not clear that it would be) if universities were not to lose roughly £3 billion a year. Even if all the money came from the taxpayer though, it could hardly cost more than the current wasteful system!

Nevertheless, if the Conservatives get back into power after the general election they are likely to raise the current £9000 cap on fees, only agreed as a compromise with the Liberal Democrats. Oxford, Cambridge and a handful of other 'top' universities would then charge more, possibly forsaking any state support and direction, leaving universities that could not compete on price to go to the wall. Many would collapse into virtual learning centres while other 'efficiencies' would further unravel institutions: for instance, through sharing

back-office support for merged services (as at Nottingham and Birmingham, Queen Mary and Warwick) if not through outright 'mergers' or takeovers, as at the Institute of Education by UCL. Management buy-outs or corporate buy-ins are also possible, plus closure of under-recruiting/researching departments and other cost-cutting measures such as the attack on pensions in the older universities. In the newer ones we might see more two-year 'degrees' taught over four terms.

This would fragment what is left of a more or less coherent HE system. The consequences of such a completely free market are incalculable but several institutions would go broke sooner rather than later and the number of students be drastically reduced. This had been an aim of Michael Gove and his HE counterpart, David Willetts, who both felt too many of the wrong sort of student had gone to the wrong sort of university under New Labour's policy of widening participation to HE. Gove's rigorous school standards were supposed to make it harder to get in, whilst Willetts' tripling of fees attempted to price many applicants out. After an initial reduction, however, applications recovered and as a free-market fundamentalist, Willetts accepted the will of the market; after all, if the punters were willing to pay, why not? And, anyway, what else was there for them to do?

Student or 'Apprentice'?

While loans for fees meant that the mantra of semi-privatised public services 'free at the point of delivery' could be maintained, it also meant an accumulating debt. This has added an estimated 9% to the national debt that Coalition austerity policies were supposed to reduce. In this sense, Willetts lost what Andrew McGettigan called his 'Great University Gamble' since the Government admitted it does not expect to recover more than a third of what will add up to £330 billion of unpaid loans by 2046 when outstanding balances begin to be written off. Repayment terms were not altered to start at a lower threshold than £21,000, although this could still happen, as could a range of individualised repayment schemes varying by course and institution. 'Two-Brains' Willetts even returned after last summer's reshuffle with his latest wheeze to sell the debt – this time to the universities themselves, since no one else would buy it! They could then invest in their own students but of course only a few of them could guarantee their graduates would ever earn sufficient to repay them.

Instead, the Coalition came to accept that, as Matthew Hancock (2014), 'Skills' Minister at the Department of Business, Industry and Science, declared: 'university or apprenticeship will be the new norm' for all 18+ year-olds. Cameron and Osborne have since repeated impossible pledges of 3 million 'apprenticeships' that young people will be forced onto by scrapping their benefits. Similarly, Ed Miliband promised his 2014 party conference to 'ensure as many school leavers go on apprenticeships as go to university'. With the raising of the participation age (in school, further education [FE] or training) to 18 in 2015, this policy consensus presents all English school-leavers with just

two options – 'apprentice' or student. Yet about 40% of 18-21-year-olds are students while only 10% at most are 'apprentices'.

So raising fees has not reduced student numbers, as intended by David Willetts. Nor did it hone student choice and increase interest and motivation. Instead, study is regarded by most students as a tedious performance, making exactly what it is that many are learning the $64,000 question in HE today. 'Putting students at the heart of the system', as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010 White Paper (there has still been no legislation) claimed to do, has shifted student choice towards courses that seemingly hold more secure employment outcomes, but these are often illusory. Still, students know that an upper second-class degree is necessary for hope of entry to the secure semi-professional employment most aspire to. They are also well aware of the social order of institutions and many recognise that grades in mainly literary examinations function as proxies for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital, even if that awareness is dimmed by more or less magical incantations, amplified not only in mass culture but also by educational advertising, assuring students that 'knowledge is power', and urging them to 'make your dreams come true', 'be what you want to be', 'fly', etc.

'Degrees of difference' (Ainley, 1994) in social science and humanities become, therefore, different levels of discourse – how you speak and write (spell), not what you say or know. Widening participation has not led to equitable higher education, as there are systemic and systematic inequalities by institution, subject and level of learning, with differential outcomes at graduation affording variegated purchase upon the labour market. Nor has it increased social mobility to transform lives, as teachers and lecturers sometimes fancy they do. In fact, the opposite is true; as elsewhere in education, the system functions to keep people in their place. Social divisions are heightening and hardening in higher education, where the general rule is that the older the university, the younger, whiter, more male and posher are its students. For instance, it is well established that black and minority ethnic students, although over-represented in higher education, on average graduate with lower grades at lower-status institutions (Richardson, 2008).

As well as class and ethnicity, there is an important gender dimension to this reinforced hierarchy since young women now constitute *c.*60% of all undergraduates (although this percentage would be reduced by excluding courses in education and health – but not medicine where women make up *c.*70% of students, as they do in law). Women are generally better qualified for university entry than their brothers, and also possibly more motivated to live away from their parental home for three or four years before– predictably for the majority –returning there. This is one reason the anticipated uptake of local study has not so far materialised, despite the scrapping of maintenance grants in 1999. Students who have qualified want the full student experience – like the holiday of a lifetime they may not remember much of but which will be evidenced forever on Facebook.

There are also fewer alternative opportunities open to young women than to young men. Although women comprise the majority of 'apprentices' as well as of students, many of these subsidised temporary work placements are in offices, sales and services – stereotypically female areas of employment. Young women soon become aware that this is often 'Another Great Training Robbery' (Allen & Ainley, 2014). For these and probably other reasons, young women are applying, passing and graduating from HE in larger numbers than ever before. Yet, even after endless internships (the graduate equivalent of an 'apprenticeship'), female graduates are even more likely than males to end up overqualified and underemployed. Women are therefore in the vanguard of the 'Lost Generation' (Ainley & Allen, 2010), running up a down-escalator of depreciating qualifications.

Even in the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths, still centrally funded and predominantly male, postgraduate study is necessary to avoid technician-level employment. Like internships, this advantages those who can afford to pay in what has long been a free market in postgraduate fees, ranging up to £50,000 a year for a Master of Business Administration degree at Oxford's Said Business School. Most English master's degrees are now only one-year full-time courses, and so have lost the confidence of many other European universities. The underfunding of postgraduates undermines the future of the academic profession as an army of researchers goes from temporary contract to temporary contract. At undergraduate level, STEM subjects linked to widening participation through University Technical Colleges (UTCs) reduce higher education to training, as happens elsewhere in the system, e.g. in teacher training – much of it farmed out to schools by Michael Gove, again on an apprentice model. At the other pole, academic-medical-industrial complexes grow increasingly in hock to big pharma and the corporations, encouraged by government insistence that research must result in commercial 'impact'.

The requirement to obtain a postgraduate qualification, and to serve out an often unpaid internship that – like some 'apprenticeships' – may be a prolonged job selection process, is another instance of the way the market has reinforced the dominance of the wealthy over all aspects of formal education from primary to postgraduate school. In HE this is cemented by the traditional links of HMC (the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference) private schools to Oxbridge colleges, typified by Cameron and his colleagues. But this is not the only problem with these two antique universities and their separate application system. As the only 'real Russells' within the self-styled group of '24 leading universities', they are the only institutions apart from the London School of Economics and Political Science that did not go into clearing for at least one of their subjects last year – and even the Cambridge Faculty of Education took some but perhaps this does not count! This year, most institutions except Oxbridge have lowered entry grades in the ferocious competition to cram in more students and gain more fee income that has intensified as the Government further relaxed institutional quotas.

Instead, Oxbridge restrict their numbers to increase demand, thus maintaining their staff's time for research and scholarship and so further raising their reputation. Meanwhile, they invest in bursaries and other widening participation efforts not only to cover their backs but to 'skim the cream' of state school applicants. One is tempted by Caroline Benn's proposal to leave them as research institutes while turning the colleges into adult residential institutions for people who missed out on HE earlier in their lives and have now been squeezed out of it altogether! Seriously though, what is to be done about this unholy mess?

Rebooting Robbins?

Liam Byrne (2014), Labour's shadow HE spokesperson, thinks that 'Robbins' can be 'rebooted'. Written a year after the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 Robbins Report on higher education, Byrne's pamphlet sees universities as 'power stations of the knowledge economy' (p. 9). This replays 'the white heat of the technological revolution' (p. 9) that Harold Wilson promised would 'harness science to Socialism and Socialism to science' (p. 20). Education at all levels was crucial to this promise, and Robbins's endorsement of expanding higher education beyond those who passed the 11-plus examination initiated a period of progressive reform. As Byrne sees it, 'The result was the creation of millions of opportunities for a new middle class'.

This is topsy-turvy. It was the expansion of professional and technical employment in the growing welfare state, sustained by an expanding industrial economy, that allowed for the limited upward social mobility that came to an end in the 1970s. To think that 'a grammar school education for all' (Gove's reheating of Wilson), would restart this limited upward social mobility in face of the general downward social mobility that has succeeded it in this century, is to repeat (yet again!) the error of substituting supply-side education and training for employment. As if 'skills' (actually qualifications) will conjure up the jobs to which they can be applied!

The same goes for 'apprenticeships'. Even if all were as good as the best of them (and most are not), they would not magic the British economy into a German one. But Byrne misidentifies a UK *mittelstand* of small- to medium-size interconnected companies waiting to be serviced by university researchers. He ignores earnings data to follow an hourglass theory of society, seeing the top half sustained by a 'vital 6%', whose numbers need to be augmented. Just like Blair and Brown, Byrne tells us everyone can win this global 'Race to the Top': 'There is only one way. To build a bigger knowledge economy with more high skill jobs and fewer low skill, low wage jobs'. This requires 'a different sort of higher education' to promote scientific growth in 'globally excellent shared science platforms – aka "universities"', offering 'real choice', especially to those at the bottom of the hourglass. Yet, without economic reform to end austerity and the slide into low-wage, low-skill employment, these suggestions will only reprise the failure of the Youth Training Scheme to rebuild a vocational route to

replace the industrial apprenticeships lost in the 1970s, except this time at a tertiary level of learning.

Byrne's proposals are complemented by his colleague, Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt, who wants a technical baccalaureate for the half of age 14+ school students who don't make it onto the academic route. This will mean rebranding further education colleges as 'institutes of technical education' with new part-time, two-year 'technical degrees', reinventing foundation degrees. This bipartism could bring back secondary technical schools – Labour's Lord Adonis calls for 100 more UTCs. Or worse, they may force young people failed by an academic schooling into inferior vocational options with Shadow Business Secretary Chuku Umunna's shameful promise 'to plug the young unemployed into the global economy' by cutting Job Seekers' Allowance for under-25s! In place of Job Seekers' Allowance, Byrne reports that Labour has endorsed a youth training allowance, but it is doubtful this would restore the Educational Maintenance Allowance which HE, FE and sixth-form students briefly united in demonstrating for in 2011.

However, Byrne's 'rebooting' at least presents some possibility that HE might recover itself in connection with FE by replacing market-driven expansion with regional partnerships to end the competition, encouraged by Willetts, between universities, colleges and private providers. This is because Byrne links such partnership to the need for devolution of the new market state revealed to the Westminster parties by the Scottish referendum. Unlike the national regions of Scotland and Wales, in over-centralised England there are no natural cultural and geographic regions akin to those of mainland Europe. Nor will such regions be constituted by US-style directly elected mayors which David Cameron may try to force through as the optimal internal management arrangement for privatised local government services.

There were, however, regional groupings of higher and further education institutions, such as the 'Yorkshire Rose Universities' of Leeds, Sheffield and York, intended to link together and collaborate instead of competing with other providers. So, as Byrne affirms, 'an integrated system is possible', drawing upon Spours and Hodgson's (2012) 'unified and ecosystem vision' for further and higher education, as well as on MacFarlane's recommendations (rejected by Thatcher in 1980) for tertiary colleges that could unite sixth forms and FE (see Simmons, 2013). Such a system could make real contributions in education, training and research alongside local and regional government-led economic regeneration.

An expectation of, and an entitlement to, local/regional adult further and higher continuing education should be integral to school leaving, just as it is for US high school graduates, especially with more students likely to be living at home, as is the case in other European countries. This should be the aim, even if not everyone wants to go on to higher education immediately – including many who are already there! Vocational considerations could then be balanced with the claims of personal interest (the 'education for its own sake' many teachers persist in impressing upon largely deaf ears), especially if a return to progressive

taxation meant those who earn more pay more. (This is different from the 'graduate tax' that the National Union of Students once advocated and which is how many of today's students look at their debt.)

Rediscovering the purpose of higher study within and across disciplines includes the relation of such study to an academic vocation dedicated to learning critically from the past and with research and scholarship enabling change in the future. Undergraduate participation in that continuing cultural conversation can restore a sense that many have lost of what higher education is supposed to be about. As UNESCO's 1997 *Resolution on Higher Education* states: 'higher education is directed to human development and to the progress of society'.

Conclusion

The problem remains, however, that, while universities may subscribe to this ideal, their often exaggerated claims to make their graduates 'employable' – like those of schools and colleges – cannot guarantee employment. So the perception of 'the problem' needs fundamentally to change from being one where young people are seen as having to be readied for 'employability' by earlier and earlier specialisation for vocations that may not exist when they graduate. Rather, the starting point should be a common general but not academic schooling up to age 18, linked to the assumption of democratic citizenship. This would include learning about work, and not just learning to work, for citizens 'fit for a variety of labours' and 'ready to face any change of production', of the kind that Marx advanced in *Capital* (1971, p. 494). This implies confronting the possibilities of flexibility, but avoiding the current situation where there are more people in the workforce but many are paid little for their unregulated employment.

All this needs some thinking about! In a democracy, deciding on society's future direction – which will increasingly involve recognising and ensuring what is necessary for human survival – should be the common practice of all citizens. It should be a practice for which a general education in schools not only prepares citizens but also engages them from the earliest years. Such a foundational education can be informed by the discussion, research and scholarship preserved and developed by post-compulsory further, higher and adult continuing education in a process of critical cultural transmission, creation and recreation.

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