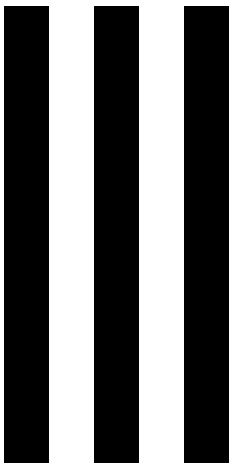


# Three reforms for a different future



The British university system is at a crossroads. The recent Browne Review combined with the Lib-Con spending cuts spells out a dire future for the university. The proposal to remove the cap on fees, to slash funding for teaching in all the arts and humanities, and the continued imposition of market models on research and teaching are leading to far more than a 'tightening of the belts' – they will completely change the nature of the university.

Guided by the market rather than by social need or academic exploration of knowledge, courses will become designed by ad-men and accountants, where the only concern is selling the 'product'. Individual departments – or even whole disciplines – will be *allowed to fail*, as the determining logic

As the government slashes the university teaching budget from £3.5 billion to just £700 million, fees will rise up to a cap of £9000 per annum, with many universities opting out of the 'public' system as fees become the dominant source of income for university departments.

becomes 'if they don't make money, then they aren't important'. Whole universities face the prospect of 'corporate takeovers', as it becomes more cost-effective for a UK university to be run as a department of 'University Inc.' – with courses designed thousands of miles away by business men looking to dominate and exploit the market. Indeed, what's to stop any corporation taking over a university if it is a financially viable business? Bradford University has already proudly announced its 'Morrisons' degree program that promises you a supermarket degree for a supermarket career.

As students and staff at different places within the university system, we can see a different way forward. We propose the following three reforms to the higher education system, exploring who should pay for them and how they should be run. These reforms offer a different

way forward to the ideologically imposed 'slash and burn' of the Browne Review and the government. These reforms are the first step in transforming the university into something it has never been- an educational institution in the hands of society, that focuses teaching and research on improving human and ecological welfare rather than bolstering private profits and reproducing elite and commercial values. These reforms should be understood as the opening of a new trajectory for the university system, and at the same time to provoke wider questions about the principles according to which our society is run.

### **The Abolition of all Fees and the Institution of a Living Wage**

*We suggest a reform of university funding to take account of who ultimately profits from it – university education should be free, and we should be waged throughout the time we are studying. We suggest corporation tax alone is used to fully fund the university system and to provide a living wage to all students. The university must also become freed from market demands and redesigned to meet the multifarious needs of society, not the single demand of the market.*

Contra 'common-sense', we understand that the purpose of the university is to train us for work. This is sometimes referred to as an investment in 'human capital' – in other words, as a result of developing new skills and new ideas, we are considered as more 'effective' or 'creative' individuals. Our increased capacities are highly valued by employers, who understand that we are able to work more efficiently or more ingeniously, therefore producing an ever increasing amount of profit in return for the wages they 'invest' in us.

The average UK student that started studying in 2010 can expect to graduate with £25,000 of debt. The recent Comprehensive Spending Review, which implemented a 40% cut to the universities teaching budget, will see the average more than double – making England the most expensive country in the world to study in. Students in the humanities are likely to see this debt be substantially higher as a result of a near-complete withdrawal of state support. Whilst this is a lot of money, taking on this kind of debt seems to make sense whilst we believe that we are 'investing in ourselves' – it's worth it in the long run, right?

So the logic goes – the better educated we are, the more 'ideas' we come up with, the more effectively we can produce profit for our employers.

There is no question that our time at university has the *potential* to lead us to being more creative or effective – education is certainly a good thing. However as it currently stands, we are having to finance our own education so that *someone else* can make money from it! As a result, that ‘£25,000’ debt is like a huge wage cut, offset onto our future earnings. Or to look at it another way, every one of us that goes to university is subsidizing the (increased!) profits of our future bosses to the tune of £25,000!

Ah – but doesn’t an increase in profits mean an increase in wages? On the contrary, real wages (how much bang-you-get-for-your-buck) have stagnated for all but the richest since 1975, despite the fact that the UK’s GDP has grown by 1131% in real terms. This is reflected in the fact that income inequality is at its highest since the end of the WW2 – the household wealth of the top 10% of the population is now over 100 times higher than the wealth of the poorest 10%. Furthermore, the current economic crisis means there is immense competition for every available job, forcing wages down even further. We all take on debt in the belief that ‘we will be the lucky ones’, but only one person ever gets the job whilst the rest find themselves burdened with an eye-watering amount of debt and with limited or no means to pay it.

As we become ever more indebted (the universities aren’t the only institutions in need of reform!), we find we have ever less choice over our own lives, working in whatever

McJob is going irrespective of whether we care or approve of the work we are doing – as the saying goes, you don't work in a poison factory for your love of poison. To stay alive, we are forced to increasingly relinquish control over our own decision making, until we find ourselves feeling powerless to change anything about the world around us.

We must shift away from this system. The universities should be fully funded by those who stand to *profit* from it – but that doesn't mean we are selling the university. Funded solely through corporation tax, the university must be redesigned by its participants so as to *benefit* the whole of society, not just those who can afford it.

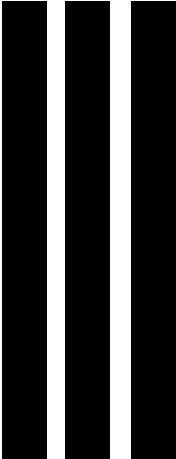


### **A debt jubilee for all past students.**

*Since 1990, students in the UK have had to increasingly subsidise the wealth of their future employers – total student debt now stands at more than £26billion. We propose that all existing student debt be cancelled.*

Within twenty years we have gone from free publicly funded university education, to a total national student debt in 2009 of more than *£26 billion!* This figure is likely to be considerably higher if we were to take into account further debts accumulated through credit cards and student overdrafts. Far from this being a wise 'investment in ourselves', the last twenty years have seen a huge wealth transfer from students to their future employers. As a result, we suggest the retrospective cancellation of all outstanding student debts – a 'debt jubilee' – the cost of which should be picked up by those that have benefited from our education.

Prior to 1990, university tuition fees were publicly funded and every student was provided with a means tested maintenance grant – students were in effect given a nominal wage during the course of their studies. Student loans began to be issued in the 1990/1 academic year, with the average loan issued being a mere £392. With the election of the New Labour government in 1997 and the subsequent Dearing Report, a flat student fee of £1000 was introduced in the 1998/9 academic year and the grant system was finally abolished – £1.23 billion of student loans were issued in its place. The Higher Education Act in 2004 saw the tuition fees jump again to £3000.



## **The abolition of the Research Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey**

*The REF and the NSS turn education and research into a numbers game, serving no purpose but to create markets within and between universities. These measurements should be abolished, and alternative mechanisms devised that hold teaching accountable to students and research accountable to society – not the market.*

The ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (REF) and the ‘National Student Survey’ (NSS) are two quantitative measurement mechanisms applied to all university research and teaching across the UK. Their purpose is to assess, measure and quantify teaching and research. Although the exact framework is currently unclear, the REF will almost certainly operate on the basis of grading the research ‘quality’ of an individual department and thus University according to a sample of four journal articles per academic, with premium grades awarded to articles that are published in the ‘top-ranked’ journals. The NSS meanwhile assesses universities according to student ‘satisfaction’ with the university experience. It is these two measurement mechanisms which allow universities to



make otherwise arbitrary claims to be a 'top ten research university' and to stake out management goals of 'becoming a top 50 university worldwide'.

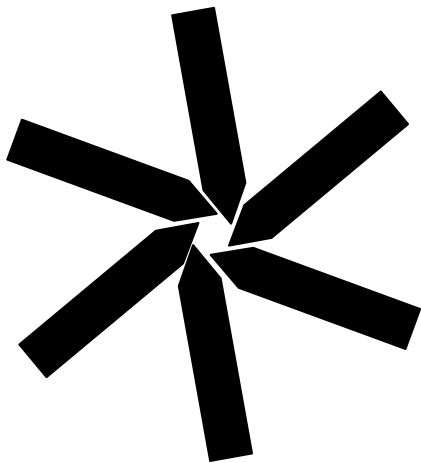
As a result of these two *quantitative* assessments, we are theoretically able to compare universities based on the *quality* of their research and teaching. This ability to directly compare the 'performance' of universities is fundamental in facilitating market competition between universities, as will become ever-more evident with the ever increasing rise in the 'cap' on tuition fees. After all, how could one university justify charging more than another unless it could 'objectively prove' its superiority through a system of direct comparison? Furthermore, this competition theoretically leads to an improvement in standards across the board, as academics are forced to work harder and teach better so as to work their way up the league rankings, which in turn leads to greater funding and attracting larger student numbers.

In reality, rather than guaranteeing or improving the 'quality' of universities, these quantitative assessments lead to a short-circuiting, as research and teaching becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of 'representations' rather than towards the research or teaching itself. It matters less and less *how well* you teach or *what* you research, only that you are able to meet-or-beat your performance indicators. Managers increasingly

bully researchers into abandoning any research that isn't guaranteed to provide a short-term influx of REF-able papers; academics are coerced into publishing three or four vacuous papers instead of one meaningful contribution; teaching becomes watered down, exams become easier, and marking becomes 'favourable' because *better marks lead to happier students*. The degree itself becomes nothing but a 'representation' of intellectual advancement, nothing but a brand stamped onto you as you leave the sausage factory. Meanwhile academics are becoming nothing but well-trained circus monkeys, increasingly more skilled at dancing to the inane tune of their ring-leaders.

Whilst these two measurement systems are central to the abstraction and qualitative devaluation of research and teaching, a series of other 'metric' systems are being introduced that will have similar effects. Undoubtedly the most pernicious of these is the creation of the 'employability factor' for specific modules or degrees, which is nothing short of tailoring education *directly* to the demands of corporations. In a jaw-droppingly audacious sleight of hand, employers will be able to directly train and produce their future employees, and then get the employee to pick up the cost *and* expect them to be grateful for it! Are we really so blind that we will fall for this?

As if the imposition of these mechanisms isn't degrading enough, their administration demands a huge quantity of resources. Teaching and research are activities which by their very nature are resistant to quantification, necessitating an expensive and unwieldy bureaucracy to impose these meaningless mechanisms. The REF's predecessor, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), cost between £30-£37 million to administer for the 1996 report, and the costs have risen year on year. Abolishing these market mechanisms would not only reduce unnecessary spending on universities and strip away inane bureaucracy, it would liberate research and teaching from the fetters of vacuous competition.



### **Crisis as possibility**

The future prepared for us by Lord Browne and the Lib-Con's is contemptible and unthinkable. Their future will see academic courses designed not by academic staff but by ad-men and accountants.

Courses will be decided upon not for their academic rigour

or their contribution to human betterment, but on their ability to be 'sold' – education as product. Students will have to accept huge wage cuts offset onto their future earnings, just for the privilege of producing profits for someone else. Their future is an unfair and elite system geared towards the betterment of the few.

Ultimately, their future serves as the death knell of the university. When their unthinkable future finally and inevitably fails – and it will, for how many of us can really carry the burden of £100k more debt spread across our lives? – the final buyout of the university shall commence. Every course will become a 'Morri-Course', as corporations wilfully swoop in to take direct control of the university. Who would be stupid enough to pay for their education when a corporation will pay for them? The privatisation will be complete; the university will have finally become nothing but an in-house research and training unit.

It can be different.

As the only people who can *profit* from the university are the businesses that employ us, the university should become fully funded through corporation tax. As an institution which everyone should *benefit* from – not just those who can afford to pay – all university decision making should be free from the market and the restrictions it imposes. We don't want to gain degrees from the 'Pepsi-Cola Metropolitan University' or a PhD

from the 'University of JP Morgan', and we don't want to research how to 'engineer societies' to make them more financially productive. The university should not be a research laboratory for private corporations, but a common institution that works in the interests of the people. The university should strive to produce knowledge which is for the benefit of society as a whole – not for those private interests who can afford to fund research.

We are proposing the creation of an alternative future, a university that works in the common interests of all, towards solving the problems we face and providing us with the capacity to live well. A university that fosters critical thought, passion, creativity and a genuine search for knowledge, not a space where students are passive consumers filled with facts and figures. This will invariably demand an overhaul in how we decide what is taught and researched. We must design a university that belongs to its participants – by the staff that teach and research, by the students that study, and by the support staff who keep the whole thing running. We will need new feedback mechanisms that *qualitatively* improve the university, rather than market models that short circuit our endeavours. We must find new ways to make the university respond to the society of which it is part – research goals must be determined by popular needs not private profit. All of these are questions we must pose; these reforms open the space to let us ask them.

The university is in crisis. It is up to us to decide its future.

The Really Open University

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