

The marketisation of our universities: Economic criteria get precedence over what's good in human terms

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*Business criteria, not education or the public good, drive what marketised universities do, writes **Luke Martell**. Universities are restructuring for the new era, ploughing money into marketing and glitzy buildings, designed to appeal to applicants as much as function for those that use them. It's a revolution in what the university's about, and a counter-revolution is needed.*



In 2010 the UK government announced 100 percent cuts to the funding of most teaching at universities. To fill the gap, students' contributions to fees in England trebled widely to £9000 a year or close to that. 12 years earlier higher education had been free. The government say the changes are necessary for deficit reduction, the reason also given for cuts and marketisation across health, welfare and local government.

But these cuts are not necessitated by budget deficits. Tuition fees, already low, are being abolished in [Germany](#). In the UK there isn't less money involved. It's just that students cough up rather than taxpayers, without getting more for the greater contribution they make. Loans and defaults might actually cost the government more. And students could find interest rates hiked, so their debt is retrospectively increased.

The [marketisation of universities](#) is a political choice, made without a democratic mandate. Changes are in line with conservative ideology to reduce, privatise and marketise the public sector. They alter [what a university](#) and society are all about. It's argued that working class applications haven't been hit by students paying fees. But the data's [flawed](#). Since the [Robbins Report](#) more people from all classes are going to university but the [relative chances](#) for working class people have reduced.

Universities are being allowed to recruit more students with top A level grades. These individuals are usually from higher class backgrounds and disproportionately go to elite universities. So the well-off are being given extra spaces, on top of the advantage they already have. And the elite universities they apply to are being allowed to pull further away from the rest of society.

At my university, I'm not asked any more to develop courses to fill an educational gap or for the public good, rather only to get fee income in. Fees combined with education-for-employability and internal markets mean that universities are cutting areas such as adult education and expanding in subjects like business and management.

Universities is one thing Britain does well. But continental universities are beginning to look more [attractive](#) to Brits than UK universities do to overseas students witnessing high fees and anti-immigration policies.

Public universities remain theoretically not-for-profit. But the government are changing regulations for what you need to qualify as a university, to encourage [for-profit providers](#) to set up shop, subsidised by taxpayers money providing loans for their students. Government contributions to fees had allowed public universities to charge less than private providers but that disadvantage for for-profits has gone. We now have what are effectively two for-profit universities, the University of Law and BPP. A year ago there were none.

Universities are restructuring for the new era, ploughing money into marketing and glitzy buildings, designed to appeal to applicants as much as function for those that use them. Investment in the marketised university is funded by cuts elsewhere, outsourcing of staff to for-profit companies where typically pensions are poorer, like pay and conditions, and there's greater job insecurity. For those kept in-house, employers are scaling back job security and academic freedom in university [statutes](#), pay is on the decline and hours long. Outlay on [student recruitment](#) is increasing at the expense of spending on staff and students.

Changes are being introduced by managements who restructure governing bodies to close down the influence of staff and students. [Consultation](#) is replaced by 'engagement'. This means consumer-style surveys rather than [democratic](#) discussion. 2,500 managers and top staff at UK universities [earn more](#) than £100,000 a year and senior management salaries rose by an average of £5,000 at the last count. Vice-chancellors rake in an average of £250k a year. Other staff have had their pay cut by 13% since 2009 and more than 10,000 university employees earn less than the living wage, many on casual contracts with no guaranteed work.

Community is affected as staff and students are treated not as citizens of the university but recipients of top-down instructions, producers of value and consumers. With outsourcing, universities host the employees of different companies, cost-reduction taking priority over commonality. Quantitative measures are seen to represent quality-hours that [students work](#), for instance. Judgment of universities by the income their graduates earn is being encouraged. Because family background is a key factor, this incentivises elitism in intake over quality of education.

It's not as if we haven't been warned. [Chilean](#) students have been braving tear gas for years to make their point about the privatised education system. [For-profits in the USA](#) put more [revenue](#) into marketing and profit than student support and teaching. They've been accused of [bullying and lying](#) in recruitment. Income gets diverted to multi-million dollar CEO salaries. Their students get state loans, one fifth defaulted on, at the expense of the taxpayer. At the [University of Phoenix](#), the priority is enrolments. What happens next is less well resourced. 16% of students graduate. 95% of its tutors are part-time.

Business criteria, not education or the public good, drive what [marketised universities](#) do. Economic criteria get precedence over what's good in human terms. Unequal opportunities for applicants and students, and between universities, and managers and their employees, are widening. Managers impose, push out staff and student unions, and side-line consultation. Community is broken up by inequalities, the exclusion of university members from citizenship, and the fragmentation of the workforce with outsourcing.

It's a revolution in what the university's about. The Labour Party started it all and have no alternative. Academics are often passive and individualised, while [some](#) speak out. Trade unions [could fight](#) back if they decided to. Student [direct action](#) is [way ahead](#) of the game. Whoever does it, counter-revolution is needed; for human values of education, equality, society and democracy.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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