

The Mirage of Self-Finance in UK Higher Education; or How To Keep Non-Elites Out



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Picture taken from [@LondonStudent](#) (November 4th) [#GrantsNotDebt](#)

Given recent events, namely the student march against the UK Government's cut in maintenance grants and cuts in education, and a consultation paper presented by the Conservative Party government about Higher Education that was published two days late, the conversation about UK university fees and student maintenance has taken centre stage. The proposed government plan would, among other things, implement a 'teaching excellence framework' that would classify universities' performances and according to this rating, allow them, or not, to uncap their fees. Meanwhile, the Labour party has opposed these measures, as shown by the University spokesman Gordon Marsden's comment about this green paper -stating it "would create a 'two-tier system'" (BBC)- and John MacDonald's speech at the student march. After the Occupy Movement's traction last year, the Labour leadership has supported at least some of these claims, and the new leader, Jeremy Corbyn, has announced plans to scrap university fees – following the suit of other EU countries such as Germany, the other main regional economic power. The issues go beyond fees however, as Nona Buckley-Irvine, the LSESU General Secretary states on the LSESU website:

"We are all aware that the cost of living and studying London is extortionately high. Whether it be course fees, the price of living in halls or renting privately, or basic needs like food and transport, it's tricky to balance a budget. Increasingly, students are going into debt in order to survive London, or having to think about dropping out, taking up considerable part time work, or not even coming to London at all."

It's in this context that it is essential to provide and promote dialogue: whether there will be a continuation of the 'Americanization' of higher education with its two tier education system and record high fees; or a 'Europeanization', with larger state subsidies and where students aren't treated as consumers. I chose to contribute my experiences as a part time masters student that worked on two zero hour contracts in my first year. With this, I hope to expand upon the already existing conversation started in this blog series by Ronda Daniel, by discussing a short reflection on my experience being a working student and an analysis of the problems that underlie the current state of affairs. I will concentrate on two issues that are unaddressed both by this particular university and the larger underlying mentality that considers students to be perfectly able to sustain themselves through working full or part time in the UK.

As an EU sociology graduate, I looked for a masters degree that would challenge me, enable me to develop research competencies and skills in a university whose environment was international, interesting, motivating. I found all this at the LSE, except for something that I had come to expect: conditions that would allow a student to sustain themselves. This wasn't due to a lack of research or foresight: I knew the costs of a masters degree and life in London; that I would have to ask my family for the support they could provide in paying for my fees; and that for me to be able to work enough hours to fully sustain my stay in London I'd have to do a part time degree. I knew I'd have to organize myself extremely well and expected for it to be a complex and adventurous challenge. My organization and dedication had already been put to test during my undergraduate studies, and I had been able to balance being a trainee research assistant in an EU Comenius project and being actively involved in my university community. What I did not expect is that despite universities displaying information online stating that many students work, at the LSE it is a definite minority; that the seemingly overwhelming job opportunities were so highly competitive

that despite my work and academic experience I was unable to find flexible qualified work. Long story short, during my first year in London I worked in a fast food restaurant in Oxford Street and later in the LSE SU Shop as a member of the part time Student Retail staff.

Timetables that jeopardise the self-financed pursuit of a degree:

Outside of the 10 executive MSc programmes (4 of which are part time), all of the complete degrees at the LSE are conducted in daytime schedules. These 10 programmes are targeted for mid-career and senior professionals that wish to continue working while they study. This catering is interesting on two particular fronts: while on one end, it acknowledges that there are students that cannot dedicate themselves to studying full-time due to work arrangements, it only considers mature students who have already completed an undergraduate degree and are currently working. Obtaining or maintaining a job whilst attending the normal erratic day timetables is extremely difficult. In my experience, I could only find work in areas unrelated to my skills and were precarious. Despite the similarities in terms of contract and lack of security of working hours, conditions differed significantly; whilst in the restaurant I was paid 4 pence over the minimum wage, with long and hectic shifts, in the SU Shop, due to the LSE's commitment to Living Wage, I was able to decrease schedule and was in a calm environment.

Marginalized issues and narratives:

Much like Ronda Daniel mentioned in her post, the elitist environment exudes what some, on occasion, do spell out: 'poor people don't come to the LSE'. I spoke to fellow students that were, like me, working to sustain themselves and found that far from the romantic image of the working student that I was sold before arriving, many worked in similar conditions to mine. Two examples I particularly recall were one of a continuing LSE student working as a retail manager, who had risen up in an establishment he'd worked since his undergraduate days and had a flexible 40 hour work week which left him disheartened and exhausted, and another student that worked in a bar. Even though the second student stated some positive aspects, which included the night time schedule and the tips she received, the main downside was her tiredness during the day which took away a lot of the energy she needed to be attentive class and to study to her best ability.

I got to know the university from a different perspective, met many more students and made more friendships than I otherwise would have -from students in different degrees and departments to fellow LSE staff members. I was lucky that the retail managers were friendly and attentive to our issues, making our small community feel like a family away from home. However, there were downsides, like fellow students treating me like dirt in my workplace and a couple of classmates suddenly looking down on me when this issue came up. Most importantly however, much like the examples, in order for me to support myself financially, the amount of time I worked left me often tired and intermittently demotivated. I managed to keep up with my modules, but not up to the quality standard I wanted. Since I *needed* to work, I was unable to fully dedicate myself to studying for exams. I admit that at the most hectic of times, I was working myself to the bone and feeling that it was all for nothing.

The problem isn't in students engaging in work or other activities, but in the needlessly high costs that are massive hurdles for non-elites, and lead to most students stacking up debt and/or toiling in precarious jobs that put their studies on the line. A system which requires privilege or undue hardship cannot truly be considered a meritocratic system that is open to all. Moreover, the current university system does not take these issues into account so that already disadvantaged students are further marginalized by policies that consider them outside the norm of what university students should be. As a sociologist, my experience in the UK in both working environments was invaluable for understanding London and the UK, immigration, service occupations, the precariat, student workers, and universities as organizations, but the degree of involvement necessary also took away my ability to truly be a part of the LSE student community and do my best in my studies.

I believe it is fitting to end this blog post by mentioning two European countries' policy examples, which despite many differences are illustrative of possible alternatives to the systems in place. In Portugal, university fees range between €1,000 and €5,000 – which makes it one of the 9 EU countries in the 'highest fee bracket', where England is considered an outlier. In addition, all masters degrees are in what is called an 'after labour timetable' where classes start at 6pm. This allows students to maintain or obtain jobs during their studies and has the advantage of having a more heterogeneous environment. At undergraduate level, the day and night schedules normally coexist, and students have the choice of choosing or alternating between them. The second example hails from Germany and relates to nationwide policies. According to DAAD data, university fees were either scrapped completely or are an average of €450 per year. However, due to the inherent costs of living and studying, the Deutsche Studedntenwerk estimates around two thirds of students work.

In the end, this questions the current government's 'ambitious' project of increasing the share of disadvantaged students by 20% by 2020: given that many are being kept out of universities currently and with a continuation of these nationwide and university-specific policies, is it viable to expect different results?

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