Can't pay, must pay

Long ago, in a political galaxy far away, I was educated at one of the world's elite universities. Neither I, nor my middle-class parents, paid a penny in upfront fees for this privilege. In fact, the state—or more precisely my local municipality—paid me a substantial 'maintenance grant' every term which covered my room in college, living expenses, books and other study essentials. I even had something left over to buy beer at the bar, a few early punk records and a basic hi-fi system on which to play them (since it was the 1970s, when things were made to last, I still have the same hi-fi system).

That world is long gone, at least in my native country, though it persists up to a point in my adoptive land, Finland. University education here remains completely free to the 'consumer', that is, to all EU citizens. Every school-leaver resident in the country can claim additional support from the welfare system, including a substantial study grant and housing benefit. Although insufficient to buy a car or other fashion items considered essential by today's students, it is nevertheless sufficiently generous to cover the basics.

Of course, all this is not really free, and is instead paid for by the taxpayer. In the UK, where taxes have been progressively reduced in accordance with a different prevailing ideology, a system modelled on that in the USA has superseded 'free' education. Every university student in England must now pay a sizeable annual fee, covering an increasing fraction of the cost of study. As the economic crunch bites harder, these fees look set to rise to the point at which they will act as a significant deterrent to enrolment, also producing a funding shortfall in the least attractive departments.

To afford university under such conditions, prospective students or their parents must either be rich, or must accumulate substantial debts to cover their fees and living expenses for 3–5 years. Ironically, to rescue the state from its debt crisis, students

will accumulate huge private debts, thus not only paying for their education but also subsidizing the banks that caused the crisis in the first place. The social effects of this policy will also be keenly felt. In North America, private philanthropy is well established and the top universities also enjoy a healthy investment income, enabling them to provide scholarships to gifted students from modest backgrounds. Universities in England risk not only a funding famine, but also the loss of some of their brightest potential students. Oxford and Cambridge might revert to being bastions of class privilege, rather than of high-class education.

The contrary argument is that if something is free, it is not valued. If forced to pay fees, students take their studies seriously and graduate in the shortest time possible, even if they need to take a part-time job to supplement their income. But in countries that retain 'free' university education systems, many students also have part-time jobs, reflecting lifestyle expectations quite different from those I grew up with. Speaking as a university teacher who would prefer to see his students devote every waking hour to their studies rather than working evenings in a bar, neither model seems satisfactory. I have seen many brilliant students fail to live up to their potential simply for lack of sleep.

The 'free at the point of delivery' model has other disadvantages. Although the period of study grant expires, other privileges do not, which means that students who do not graduate in the prescribed time tend to stretch out their studies over many years. Not only does this impair the seriousness with which they study, it also decreases the length of their productive working life, trapping them for too long at the supermarket checkout or behind the wheel of a taxi.

Where does the happy medium lie, or is it even attainable? I find the argument that the costs of education should be born only by those who directly enjoy its benefits specious. Even though, as a single person, I

am paying the raw costs of university courses for all my fellow taxpayers who choose to have two, three or twelve children, I also enjoy the benefits of living in an educated, socially responsible society. The people who monitor my health, file my taxes, or plan the development of my city's infrastructure do their jobs well because they were properly trained. The resulting social equality means that my taxes support education, instead of an overburdened criminal justice system, and the streets are safe to walk. But the no-fee model must also come with strict rules or even financial penalties, to ensure that study is taken seriously and that students graduate in the appropriate time.

Before the 1970s, few people were educated to degree level—the civil service, top professionals and those destined for academia. Now, it is the majority. The nature of a first degree has changed too: today's courses emphasize absorbing and processing information, tasks common to most contemporary careers. The actual degree subject is often relatively unimportant, at least in the Anglo-Saxon countries. As this is more expensive than teaching a minority, those who foot the bill—whether it is the government, fee-payers or philanthropists—prefer to spend less money per student. Since governments are struggling to contain public spending, while fearing electoral reaction against additions to the financial burdens of taxpayers, the quality of university education is at risk everywhere. Academia is a soft target, but if it becomes chronically underfunded, we will merely be going through the motions of preparing tomorrow's workforce for the challenges that confront us. Politicians should have the courage to admit that universities are not a luxury that can be foregone in times of austerity.

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