

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is in crisis. The fundamental purpose of universities should be to promote critical enquiry, social innovation and cultural renewal. But these aims have been sidelined in an atmosphere of increasing managerialism and commercialisation.

Higher education is vital to our cultural health. It should be concerned with public engagement and increasing social participation, not considered merely a production line for enhancing the earning power of individuals. The current focus on research ‘outputs’ – in the narrow definition used by the Research Excellence Framework – means that the crucial role of lecturers as teachers has been denigrated. This emphasis needs to be reversed.

The Conservative-led Coalition and the Labour Party bear responsibility for the current system of university funding, which is largely dependent on tuition fees that now stand at £9,000 a year for undergraduates. This was a betrayal of a promise and has blighted the future of thousands of young people who now graduate with a debt of at least £45,000.

With the removal of public funding from most undergraduate and all postgraduate courses, UK universities are now all but privatised. The only people to benefit from the current system are university Vice-Chancellors and senior bureaucrats, who award themselves massive pay rises, while those on the ground who carry out teaching and research face ever more punishing terms and conditions of employment. In practice, this severely compromises the quality of education through reduced student-contact hours with overstretched staff.

Zero-hours contracts are now commonplace and shocking disparities in pay characterise every campus, especially among service workers, who are commonly denied a living wage. Conversely, university administrative departments continue to swell as money is routinely wasted on copying expensive private sector practices – including ludicrous rebranding exercises – in search of ‘market share’. The future of the arts and the humanities has been endangered by a systematic denigration by the dominant political parties and university administrations alike, who create a perception of such courses as an expensive luxury without the vocational ‘use-value’ that renders them worth the financial risk. The Green Party believes that the arts and humanities have an essential part to play in creating a more democratic, sane and participatory society.

The situation for mature students is even more dire. Over the past five years, every continuing education department in the UK has been scaled back or closed down altogether, often as a managerial response to caps on students numbers and diminished funding for the sector as a whole. Adults wishing to return to education are faced with a situation where short courses and part-time study are considered not cost-effective in market terms.

In December 2010, just after the trebling of tuition fees, Caroline Lucas MP argued that the costs of a free higher education could be met by increasing corporation tax for larger companies to the level paid in other G7 countries and ring-fencing some of that money. Businesses depend enormously on graduates’ skills and knowledge, so it’s only fair that they invest in the higher education system from which they benefit.

Allied to this, the cost of studying the qualifications that universities stipulate as entry requirements is prohibitive. An ‘A’ level for those who are not registered as school or college students attracts a fee of several hundred pounds. Access to education diplomas are also meshed within a loan system for those over the age of 24, and uniformly cost in excess of £3,000. The part-time and short courses for which non-traditional applicants can enrol are often hugely expensive, especially when measured against the contact-time with lecturers.

‘Lifelong Learning’ is a phrase that is much used by politicians and education professionals. Giving people the opportunity to be ‘second chance’ learners should be a crucial part of what universities offer to wider society. Countering the monetisation of higher education across the entire sector is vital to reverse the destructive and wasteful market model of university education.