



**RIVER VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL**

General Certificate of Education Advanced Level  
Higher 1

**JC2 Preliminary Examination**

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**GENERAL PAPER**

**8807/02**

Paper 2

**30 August 2023**

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**1 hour 30 minutes**

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**READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST**

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*Becky Frankiewicz argues why we need to rethink the current model of university education.*

- 1 On the surface, universities are a nice idea. People go in, pick a subject they like, learn from the experts, and leave being job-ready and future-ready young adults.

This is why so many people decide to go to college, even if it means making big financial and personal sacrifices. Yet just because so many people are doing it does not mean it is necessarily a good thing to do. In fact, while there is generally a cost – in terms of employment prospects – of not having a college degree, there are not always clear competitive advantages in having one, particularly if almost half of the population has one. The reality is that many people today find the benefits of higher education underwhelming. 5

- 2 Most university graduates have very fond memories of their years in college. Unfortunately, most graduates also have memories – more recent and significantly less fond – of the challenges they face when they enter the labour market as well as the frustrations employers express when dealing with them and finding them unprepared for the workplace despite being successful in the classroom. And no one is spared these challenges: even graduates from top programmes today spend a great deal of time trying to find appealing jobs, and they always end up having to compromise with their choices. 1  
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- 3 Students have unrealistic (but understandable) demands of college. They enter college with the blind faith that having a university degree will give them a better chance of succeeding in life. After all, irrespective of their global ranking, all universities market themselves as an engine of growth, employability, and success, and a college education is still a promise to upgrade someone's talent. This inevitably sets a high bar that is just not feasible to fulfil at scale. Not everyone can be a leader, a CEO, a manager, or a highly sought-after knowledge worker. By any objective measure, we have come a long way in the past 100 years, transitioning from monotonous assembly lines and routine jobs to flexible and meaningful careers. But let us not forget that it is just not possible to give everyone their dream job. If our career aspirations surpass the available opportunities and our self-perceived talents exceed our actual talents, we are surely destined to be miserable at work. Perhaps this explains the prevalence of low employee engagement ratings despite more emphasis on worker well-being. The equivalent in our personal lives would be if everyone aspired to date movie stars: the result would be a flood of dissatisfied people. 2  
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- 4 But at the end of the day, students want jobs. The number one reason students have for investing so much time and money into a college education is to get a good job, with two-thirds of them seeing 'financial stability' as the primary goal. That is not an unreasonable expectation to have. Nevertheless, despite record low unemployment, under-employment is extremely common, with as many as 40% of college graduates working in jobs that do not actually require their qualifications. In fact, one in every five graduates is still not working in a degree-demanding job even 10 years post-graduation. For all the kerfuffle about education for its own sake, it is also unlikely that students' main motivation for going to college is their desire to engage in the actual process of learning – or absorbing knowledge – as much as the actual degree they receive at the end. Anyone who says otherwise should be asked the following question: would they rather attend a top university without receiving a degree or obtain a degree from a top university without the education? 3  
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- 5 Students are paying more and more to get less and less: other than healthcare, nothing has risen as much as the cost of higher education. Student debt has reached an all-time-high in America, higher than credit card debt and higher than car financing debt. Believe it or not, some people have managed to accumulate \$1 million in student debt. To be sure, there is still a return on investment to most college degrees, and people are generally better off having one than not having one. However, for every prestigious degree that generates a positive return on investment, there are many less prestigious colleges and careers where the balance is negative. It is also true that the more graduates a nation produces, the less value-add there is in being a graduate. All these explain the forecast that college enrolment should plateau in the next two or three years. 5  
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- 6 The advantage of more education is generally true. No matter the background, higher attainment will typically help people achieve a larger income. Theoretically, at least, college is still capable of providing students with the connections and experiences that allow them a foothold in the industries of their choice. The value-add of a university degree is inversely related to a student's socio-economic status – while those who already have wealth, privilege, and contacts will enjoy high levels of career success anyway, the significance of the degree for those born with less cannot be understated. This is what makes the college admissions scandals in countries like China and the U.S. so ironic: the people who could afford to pay such high bribes were the ones who needed to do this the least – their wealth, privilege, and contacts virtually guaranteed that they would land in a good place in life regardless of whether or where they attended college. 6  
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- 7 In reality, however, universities tend to increase rather than decrease inequality. Unless you are lucky enough to be born in a place like Denmark, where, on top of free tuition, university students enjoy state support to the tune of almost a thousand dollars a month to cover their living expenses, higher education exacts a cost. For the rest of us, there are debilitating tuition fees as well as invisible costs – the wages unearned, the families unsupported – that accumulate in the background throughout one's university education. These costs, negligible for some, become more painful the less you have. 7  
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- 8 And that is assuming everyone has an equal opportunity to qualify for higher education in the first place. Even when elite universities focus on enrolling minorities, they tend to prioritise what some call the 'privileged poor', such as Black or Hispanic people from higher socio-economic status. Even when low-income students are admitted, many experience culture shock upon entering highly selective campuses, which is intensified by differences in possessions and experiences during the fall, winter, spring and summer breaks. Inadequate advising and mentoring also fail to provide the direction needed to navigate an unfamiliar environment, especially when many students lack familiarity with the terminology, academic expectations and the 'hidden curriculum' found at highly selective institutions. 8  
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In short, there is much that we need to rethink about the current model of higher education, but there is no incentive to do this rethinking if we continue to dismiss its flaws and costs to society as a necessary evil to be tolerated. The burden is on us.

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