

Labour's fees promise: a step in the right direction

Patrick Ainley *considers the prospects for higher education after the election.*

Introduction: a decision at last!

Labour's long awaited promise of a reduction for all English undergraduate student fees to £6,000 from 2016-17 (so many applicants may defer entry this year) will require speedy legislation in the new parliament. It will also have knock-on effects on HE-in-FE students and those in the private colleges David Willetts encouraged to charge £6,000 or less. There are also implications for the Office for Fair Access which ensures that universities currently charging more than £6,000 agree to improve access.

To counter accusations that these changes will benefit rich students, Labour also announced raising the maintenance grant by £400 per year for those with a family income up to £42,000. This is not much with which to address student poverty but, on the other hand, Ed Balls will tax wealthy parents and other individuals salting away taxable pension contributions to produce £2.7bn annually of the around £3bn required to bridge the gap in reduced fee funding. So HE staff are reassured they can keep cramming students in to keep themselves in jobs, although maybe a Labour government would also reimpose student number controls. Even if all the money for fees came from tax-payers though, it could hardly cost more than the current wasteful system!

This is because 'Two Brains' Willetts lost what Andrew McGettigan called his 2010 *Great University Gamble* since the Government admitted it does not expect to recover more than a third of what will add up to £330bn unpaid student loans by 2046 when outstanding balances begin to be written off. Repayment terms were not altered to start at a lower threshold than £21,000, although this could still happen. So could a range of individualised repayment schemes varying by course and institution. 'Two-Brains' even returned after last summer's reshuffle with his latest dead-in-the-water wheeze to sell the junk debt to the universities but they weren't buying – any more than anyone else.

Despite these and other unresolved issues, UCU and the National Union of Students, which both wanted fees phased out as in Germany and other European countries, are right to welcome the proposed reduction as a step in the right direction.

Student or 'apprentice'?

However, if the Conservatives get back, Labour predict they will raise the cap to £15,000 but why not uncap altogether? Universities that could not compete on price would then go to the wall. Many would collapse into virtual learning centres while

other 'efficiencies' would further unravel institutions with 'mergers' or take-overs, like the Institute of Education by UCL. Management buy-outs or corporate buy-ins are also possible, plus further cost-cutting measures like the closures of under-recruiting / researching departments that are already happening, or like the attack on pensions in the older universities. In the newer ones there might be more two-year 'degrees' taught over four terms.

All this would fragment what is left of a more or less coherent HE system. But, if the punters are willing to pay, why not? And, anyway, what else is there for them to do? Answer: become an apprentice!

Matthew Hancock, then 'Skills' minister at the Department of Business, Industry and Science, declared in a DBIS press release on 12/5/14: 'university or apprenticeship will be the new norm' for all 18+ year-olds. Cameron and Osborne have since repeated pie-in-the-sky pledges of three million 'apprenticeships' young people will be forced onto by scrapping their benefits. Similarly, Ed Miliband promised his 2014 Party Conference to 'ensure as many school leavers go on apprenticeships as go to university'. With the raising of the participation age (in school, FE or employment with training) to 18 this year, this policy consensus presents all English school-leavers with just two options – 'apprentice' or student.

This is not viable for reasons Martin Allen and I explained previously in *PSE* summarising our latest report on apprenticeships. For a start, about 40 per cent of 18-21 year-olds are students while only 10 per cent at most are 'apprentices'. More fundamentally, most employers don't really need apprenticeships and if they do they run them themselves. So, as was widely reported, when the Coalition gave employers 'ownership' of state-subsidised apprenticeships this resulted in less places – especially for young people. Also, despite the lavish advertising for apprenticeships, most 18 year-olds who qualify know they are better off with a 2.1 degree (which most get nowadays) for hopes of the secure and at least semi-professional employment to which they aspire.

As well as class and ethnicity, there is an important gender dimension to all this since young women now constitute around 60 per cent of all undergraduates (although this percentage would be reduced by excluding courses in education and health – but not medicine and law where women make up around 70 per cent of students). Women are generally better qualified for university entry than their brothers, and also possibly more motivated to live away from their parental home for three or four years before – predictably for the majority – returning there. So students who have qualified want

the full student experience, and this is one reason the anticipated uptake of local study has not so far materialised, despite the scrapping of maintenance grants in 1999.

There are also fewer alternative opportunities open to young women than to young men. Although women comprise the majority of 'apprentices' as well as of students, many of these subsidised temporary work placements are in offices, sales and services – stereotypically female areas of employment. Young women soon become aware therefore that this is often *Another Great Training Robbery*. For these and probably other reasons, young women are applying, passing and graduating from HE in larger numbers than ever before. Yet, even after endless internships (the graduate equivalent of an 'apprenticeship'), female graduates are even more likely than males to end up over-qualified and under-employed. Women are therefore in the vanguard of the *Lost Generation*, running up a down-escalator of depreciating qualifications.

This plays oddly into the new policy consensus on apprenticeships to include growing the still centrally-funded STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths to support productive industry. At one end, this means state support for academic-industrial/medical complexes sponsored by Big Pharma and the corporations. At the other, University Technical Colleges and various other links with schools, FE and training widen participation to technician level undergraduate STEM courses. Both Coalition and Labour therefore advocate more UTCs while supporting a privately sponsored Technical University of Hereford specialising in manufacturing, defence engineering and agro-technology.

Such plans are related to the need for devolution of the overly centralised market-state revealed by the Scottish referendum. Thus Willetts's successor in charge of HE was renamed the Minister of Universities, Sciences and Cities. However, England lacks culturally coherent regions of the mainland European type and they will not be constituted by Cameron and Osborne's rush towards directly elected mayors as the optimal administrative arrangement for privatised local government services integrated with a no longer National Health Service.

Meanwhile, 'One Nation' Labour's two nation education policies are complemented by a Technical Baccalaureate for the half of 14+ school students who don't make it onto the academic route. This will lead on to two-year 'Technical Degrees' that reinvent Foundation degrees in FE colleges rebranded as 'Institutes of Technical Education'. This bipartism will channel young people failed by academic schooling into inferior vocational options.

Students and parents however are well aware of

the social hierarchy of subjects and institutions. Many can see that, as Colin Waugh writes: 'nominal HE is being differentiated (for example by the concentration of research funding) into a posh bit that workers pay for from their taxes but from which they are largely excluded as students, and another bit which is increasingly vocationalised and privatised and, also, for those reasons, pushed into what is in effect a single FE (or nominally FHE) sector.'

Many also recognise that grades in mainly literary academic examinations function as proxies for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. Even if that awareness is dimmed by institutional advertising echoed in mass culture to claim 'knowledge is power' to 'make your dreams come true' / 'be what you want to be' / 'fly', etc. This is belied in the social sciences and humanities where what you know is becoming less important than how you speak and write (and especially spell!). At the top of the university hierarchy this results in the much complained about dominance of a privately schooled elite over nearly all areas of public life.

Conclusion

The fundamental problem is that university promises of 'employability' – like those of schools and colleges – cannot guarantee employment. So, fundamentally, the perception of 'the problem' needs to change from seeing education as preparing students through apprenticeships or degrees for occupations that may not exist when they complete. Instead, a common general but not academic schooling up to age 18 should be linked to the assumption of democratic citizenship with entitlement to free post-compulsory further, higher and adult continuing education at any point thereafter.

References

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- McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*. London: Pluto.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.