

Editorial: Fees Without Freedom

There is a strong case for university freedom. Universities are about illumination, about fostering illumination and about passing it on, in the deepest and broadest questions in the humanities and the sciences. To pursue this, their proper goal, they must be free from outside control in the people they appoint, in the subjects they study and in the pupils they admit.

It may be unrealistic to expect a modern state to fund universities and to respect their freedoms, though a state which does not have free universities within its borders will lack the illumination universities can provide. And this will be to the detriment of society as a whole and of those young people who might pass through their gates.

In Britain the hope of free state universities is certainly unrealistic at the moment. Recent government policy sees universities in terms of wealth creation and links with business; and it wants degree courses to be judged in terms of 'aims', 'objectives' and learning outcomes', criteria appropriate to training, perhaps, but not to education. And it also wants universities to admit many more students from what it calls lower socio-economic backgrounds, as an end in itself.

To this latter end, it is instituting an office called The Access Regulator. This person will allow universities to charge its better-off students higher fees and so partially compensate for a 36% drop in government funding per student over the last decade, providing that they admit more students from poor schools and whose parents earn little and who have had little formal education. To this end new applications forms are being devised, on which these factors will show up. And university admissions tutors are going to have to go on special courses to understand how to operate these new admissions policies.

There would be a strong argument for university fees—providing that they freed universities from extraneous interference. And there can be no objection to admissions tutors looking for academic potential in their candidates. They could do this by talking to them, and assessing their native wit; or they could get them to write about something of general interest; or they could ask their teachers for their opinions, or see how they have progressed over a given period. Best of all, they could look at the most reliable guide to future potential: a candidate's actual knowledge and achievements so far.

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But what are not signs of potential in any sense are parental poverty and a candidate's poor schooling (the latter of which is the government's responsibility in any case, and because of which universities are being forced to distort their admissions policies, and ultimately their courses, to cater for these new types of students). People would be outraged if university places were given on the basis of parental wealth and the mere fact of having attended a good school. And rightly so. What is currently being proposed is simply the obverse of admitting a candidate because he or she was born with a silver spoon, and is just as objectionable.

What we are currently seeing in Britain is what happens when universities are treated not as institutions of illumination, but simply in terms of training for wealth creation and of egalitarian social engineering. The result is the worst of both worlds, irksome fees, combined with massive and ever-more intrusive interference by the state. But, by a perverse incentive, the introduction of larger fees for students may also give an opportunity for those who wish to set up universities which are truly independent, particularly in subjects without huge capital overheads, in philosophy perhaps.