

Editorial: How Much Does a Degree Cost?

Socrates famously took no money for his teaching, or so we are told. He may, of course, have denied the Olympian gods and corrupted the young, but whatever the teaching was, it was all free. Sometimes you even got the Socratic treatment though you did not ask for it. (Poor Euthyphro!)

Today's philosophers, in certain respects, follow the example of Socrates. They often imbue the young with a sceptical spirit and they are not in the main well disposed to the gods. Some may take a pride in knowing that they know nothing. Few, though, would acknowledge daimonic inspiration, and none who make it to tenure will have done so by writing nothing.

In British universities a philosophic education, whether Socratic in spirit or not, is very far from free. In fact it will cost the undergraduate around £27,000 in fees alone. Maybe in compensation for their money normal undergraduates will not be taught that life is a disease from which only death can cure us, but £9,000 a year for what many would regard as level-headed common sense still seems a bit steep.

What is needed to teach a philosophy degree? A teacher, a room, some books and Internet access would seem to be the obvious answer, or, more accurately several teachers, to ensure a diversity of views and even topics. One wonders how such a set up, if provided for a few dozen students to spread costs, could possibly justify charges to each student of £27,000.

This question has taken on a particular urgency recently. It is pretty clear that the outcome of 2017 election in Britain was strongly affected by a promise from the Labour party to 'deal' with student debt and remit fees. This promise has subsequently been watered down, but the issue is a real one, and touched a nerve, with young people voting heavily in Labour's favour.

When real cost student fees were introduced in Britain a few years ago, the hope was that this would start a genuine market, with different universities and courses charging different prices, according to their offering. That just did not happen, and what we have is something much more like a producer cartel, with all fees roughly the same. But why should this be? If a course actually costs less than

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another course, what is the justification for the two charging the same, or, more accurately, a university or group of universities charging the same for products which actually cost very different amounts?

What is strongly needed is some transparency within universities. We need to know what a course actually costs to teach, and how much of the fee is directed to pay for things other than the actual teaching. These things will include weighty and onerous bureaucracies, of dubious value and little benefit except to those employed in them.

Socrates charged his pupils nothing. We have to accept that philosophers in universities will have to charge something for their teaching. They have to live, after all, and are not in the position of Socrates in fifth century Athens. But what they charge should be proportionate to the actual costs. Philosophers might help to unravel the whole university fee issue by beginning to ask for clarity, honesty and justice in the way their own students are charged for what they receive in their universities.