

Old Fashioned Elitism Meets Free Market Violence: On The Higher Education White Paper

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IN NOVEMBER 2015 JO JOHNSON, the pallid Minister of State for Universities and younger brother of the former Mayor of London, experienced an uncomfortable interview on Newsnight with James O'Brien. The subject was the government's 'Higher Education Green Paper', and its new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) – the latest attempt to whip the British university system into market discipline. Johnson was there to defend the position that new private universities, which have flourished under this and the previous government, would create more competition and drive up educational standards. The awkward moment came when O'Brien asked Johnson if he would send his *own* children to one of these new private universities, many of which have been mired in scandal. The following six seconds are painful to watch, as Johnson appears to lose the human capacity for speech. He finally answers with a non-sequitur: 'Where this is high quality education, we should be encouraging people to go to university.' When O'Brien remarks that '[he] couldn't tell if that was a yes or a no', Johnson smirks and replies, 'I'd love my children to go to university. There are lots of routes in life.' It's fun to watch but also revealing – behind Johnson's lifeless eyes and obfuscating rhetoric lies the government's ideological approach to higher education.

That green paper has now turned into a white paper, and one of its most striking – if unsurprising – features is that it discusses higher education almost exclusively in terms of what it contributes to the economy. The sector is judged on whether it delivers value for employers – which begs the question why do students, not employers, have to pay for it – and a successful student is seen as one who chooses an income-maximising course and goes on to become a high earner. This is elevated into a moral duty with the pronouncement: 'poor decisions by the student ... can prove costly not just for them but for the broader economy.' But there is more to the story than this 'philistine utilitarianism',

which has been a feature of the discourse around higher education for decades. The Tory vision of universities is far closer to old-fashioned elitism, with a veneer of meritocracy. There is a heavy reliance on tropes like the ‘Mickey Mouse degree’ (one without huge value in the labour market) and the corresponding appeal to creating ‘value for money’, all in the context of market competition and stratification. It’s not that the Tories don’t value subjects like classics or history (the preferred subjects of the Johnson siblings), they just don’t believe those subjects are for everyone. You can hear them saying it in private: ‘If *they* are going to survive in the world *we’re* creating for them, they’re going to need Business Studies.’

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Jo Johnson’s future is one where ‘elite’ institutions bloom. Making use of the new funding options (having “approved” status in the language of the white paper), institutions with international clout like Oxford and Cambridge will be able to part with the bureaucratic oversight of the state. They could give up on government grants in exchange for the freedom to set whatever fees they liked and be exempt from centralised Access Arrangements (government targets for accepting prospective students from free-school-meal and ethnic minority backgrounds). Formally, this is an attempt to allow Oxbridge and Russell Group universities to ape the private universities of the American Ivy League, perhaps charging comparable fees.

Meanwhile, universities without long-standing historical endowments that remain in the state system will be forced into the mindless and costly box-ticking exercise of TEF. In the old days, teaching grants used to be conferred on the basis of student numbers – the greater the quantity of students at a given university, the higher the funding. However, since the 2011 reforms, almost all grants have been abolished and teaching is now paid for out of tuition fees. Johnson wants to peg the amount universities are allowed to charge in fees to the quality of teaching, with universities that reach the desired level of excellence allowed to raise their fees in line with inflation. There is an immediate problem with this. The proposed way of measuring ‘teaching excellence’ (student satisfaction, reports by the universities themselves, and data on the destination of leavers) is based on figures that the government itself described as ‘piecemeal’ and inaccurate. However, the greater problem is that this creates another site of competition and stratification between universities. With inflation at 0.3% it’s not going to make much difference by what minute fraction of a percentage point a university is able to raise fees in 2017. But it seems this proposal would allow the Secretary of State to set future fee caps without running the changes through parliament, allowing prices to diverge without help from the CPI.

This brave new world will be complicated by efforts to encourage private universities to enter the market and start awarding degrees. Since 2010, the higher education sector has been flooded with new 'alternative providers' – from 6,600 to over 60,000. The National Audit Office recently revealed a scathing report on these new universities, mentioning 'potential misuse of millions of pounds of public money... high drop-out rates... and warnings from within the sector [which] ought to have set alarm bells ringing'. More worryingly, in this marketplace of private providers, universities will be allowed, encouraged even, to fail as much as other entrepreneurs (80% within the first 18 months), thus placing the risk on the shoulders of students. The white paper talks excitedly about a new 'risk-based' approach where the 'possibility of exit [i.e. universities closing down] is a natural part of a healthy, competitive, well-functioning market.' And while it's nice to know that if you are forced to go for a 'cheap, alternative provider' they will have had to submit a 'student protection plan' in advance, that's going to mean little if you've wasted 18 months of your life at an institution that should never have been taken seriously as a university in the first place.

These 'alternative providers' will also have the game rigged in their favour, since they're likely to have low student numbers. Although we're waiting on a technical consultation later this year, current proposals show that because of the way TEF is calculated it will carry a bias towards smaller institutions. TEF scores are calculated as the difference between a given measure of quality and the expected measure given student in-take, and that difference needs to be statistically significant. The smaller the number of students, the larger the standard error for each score and so the less chance of finding statistically significant differences. And that all fits nicely with Government plans to 'remove the student numbers criterion for university title.'

The only attempt to provide some consistency comes with the phrase 'What employers want' – which appears 35 times in the green paper. In theory the involvement of employers in shaping TEF and evaluating graduates could create a clear set of 'desirable skills', which would help to correct the long-term decline in British productivity. But, in reality, what an employer expects from an Oxbridge graduate is different to what they expect from a Middlesex University graduate. Society ascribes so much value to Oxbridge's eccentric but 'traditional' education that it will inevitably be evaluated on a different basis to other institutions. When the branding is that good it doesn't matter what transferable skills it brings with it.

The end game is as clear as it is depressing. A small number of elite universities will resemble the places they are now, just with higher fees. Students will still be able to take traditional academic subjects like philosophy, classics and history of art, safe in the value

that the Oxbridge and Russell Group brand brings with it. For everyone else university will be a cut throat world of business-relevant skills in institutions smaller than secondary schools, trying to second-guess which institutions are least likely to fail before you graduate and hoping that no-one notices if your old university is embroiled in yet another corruption scandal.

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The white paper works on the following assumed narrative: the majority of students don't care about what they are studying, aren't engaged intellectually, and aren't receiving any economic benefit from increasingly expensive degrees. They are then dropped into a tight job market where their transferable skills don't add up to much and they have to re-learn or be re-trained in work. As Oxford psychology professor Dorothy Bishop has highlighted, the government appeals to this received wisdom yet offers no evidence to support it. It asserts that students are demanding higher quality, transparency and value for money. Yet, as Bishop shows, most studies suggest overall student satisfaction levels are increasing. She also points out that the claim that employers are unsatisfied with the graduates they receive is, at best, a misrepresentation of a government report that found more than four out of five employers felt graduates were well-prepared for work. In order to defend the notion of the university as a place of flourishing, we need to undermine this caricature of the student as wasting their time.

This caricature ignores what students are actually gaining from their university experience. Higher education is a unique opportunity to engage with concepts and ideas in a way that only the most dedicated autodidact could outside an institution. It forces people to meet and socialise with people beyond their social horizon. The things people tend to regret are not going to university itself but the choice of course or other elements within the university system. Negative experiences which lead to students dropping out are often external (something exacerbated by the lack of pastoral support offered at many universities) or financial. The more university is presented as an economic investment, the more the prospect of a graduate's career (the return on the investment) is likely to turn into a psychological burden. The solution to people dropping out is not to offer them a clearer picture of the benefits a degree will give them in the job market three years down the line, it is to concentrate on the unique and intrinsic virtues of higher education.

As well as celebrating the value of university as a time for human flourishing we need to create a system that is more forgiving on the 18 year olds who make up a large a proportion of the student population. At the moment we force 17 year-olds to choose a narrow and specialised three-year degree. We then punish them if they change their mind

or stumble, deriding them when they complain about a frustrating university experience. Change on this front is not a radical suggestion – the U.S. and Scotland have a system that recognises the mutable dispositions of 18 year olds, allowing for taking simultaneous subjects and changing easily. So, the white paper’s proposal to encourage interdisciplinarity and make transferring between departments easier is welcome. But it is unfair to assume students don’t get offered a range of transferable skills options; the reality is they often don’t seek them out at university since they get enough of that in the work experience schemes they are increasingly pressured into take part in during holidays.

The Minister of State for Universities may well be surprised how many non-Etonians want to study history and classics when given the option. In many ways that is the central point: all students should be able to have a pedagogical and social experience at university that is more than training for life under capitalism. It follows, then, that the struggle for a genuine higher education goes hand-in-hand with the struggle for a decent society.