

Start trucking for the universities


Higher education must stop coyly trading on its image of ivy and quadrangles and get on with explaining why a degree matters for reasons more important than status and money, says **Richard Smith**

Cuts to the public funding of higher education, and the prospect of more to come, naturally focus the minds of university leaders on other sources of income. Most of these, from raising top-up fees to recruiting overseas postgraduate students to the more lucrative forms of research and consultancy, involve selling the university's services in one way or another. They mean the increasing exposure of higher education to market forces.

This now seems inevitable if a substantial proportion of UK universities are to continue to exist in anything like their present form. So there are two things that those of us who think this form is, on the whole, a good thing, must do (apart, naturally, from recruiting the overseas students and so on). We need to be vigilant about the distortions that 'the market' brings to educa-

tion, as to everything that it touches. We also need to think carefully and creatively about what a market in higher education might be taken to entail, beyond the crude matter of manufacturing as cheaply as possible what the customers seem to want and selling it to them at as high a price as they are prepared to pay.

Vigilance, then, to start with: a continual alertness to what should by now be the entirely familiar problems with marketising education, and higher education in particular. First, increases in fees bring the risk that students think of their education essentially as opening the way to the careers that will earn them the money with which to repay the fees. Of course in the minds of some people this is not so much a risk as a major reason for the changes in funding now under way: the most capable people will choose to go into industry, or what is left of it, commerce, and of course banking. Any professor or lecturer who thought their job was to offer a critique of such crude instrumental reasoning and to suggest alternatives to it will be brought into line when the connection between graduate salaries and particular degree courses becomes clear in league tables. If stu-



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Richard Smith, Professor of Education, Durham University



dents of Plato and Hegel are not becoming accountants and management consultants then so much the worse for philosophy, and certainly for Philosophy.

The student, and no doubt her parents, armed with league tables and other information, is now in the driving seat, in theory, and each university has to improve in order to attract customers. This means better teaching and facilities as well as sign-posted exit routes to good money. The market thus raises standards and this at least looks like progress. But here lies a second problem. If education is primarily an investment for the individual then it is no longer a public good, justified by producing civilised people who put their enhanced capacities at the services of other people and the planet. Trickle-down theory will be dragged in once more to explain that everyone benefits when 'we pay the top people well so that they don't take their skills elsewhere', but this argument is wearing very thin. And anyone who cannot grasp the idea of a public good has presumably never met a doctor, nurse or teacher who does whatever it takes for you, because that, for them, is just what being a doctor, nurse or teacher means.

A third problem here is that if a popular university charges higher fees and improves what it offers, even more students will apply than do now. But then the university is in the driving seat, not the student customer who was supposedly being empowered, because the university can pick and choose who it takes. This changes if it can take many more students than it does now: another merit of the market, surely, if good and popular universities expand and the weaker ones wither on the vine. However Lord Mandelson and his Department for Business, Innovation and Skills do not seem disposed to follow the logic of the market to this conclusion. If they did, it would not only be the withering universities that would suffer. Many well-regarded institutions would lose much of what their students seem to value (think Portakabins on the Balliol lawns): the 'knowing her children one by one' that Cardinal Newman said distinguished the university from the foundry or mint.

Fourth, the market brings with it commodification, the creation of a brand and image which quickly come to

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matter more than what might be called the real thing. Just as people buy clothing for the label, the crucial thing becomes not what happened to you at Shrewsbury University – what you learned, how you changed – but the simple fact that you went there. A friend tells me of a discussion at a meeting of his own Senate. Some members thought it was a problem that departments were cutting down on teaching in their focus on research. Did this not diminish the student experience, which could rebound on the university? The vice-chancellor replied comfortably that what mattered to students was that they would still be able to say 'I was at the top-rated department of psychology at Shrewsbury'. And so universities polish their image and invest in their websites and prospectuses and advertising, to make their brand or label better known.

A fifth objection to 'the market', and one which takes me to my suggestion that we might think about it more creatively, is this: education, it is often said, exists not simply to satisfy preferences, but to shape them. That is, while most providers of goods try to find out what their customers want (or can be got to want) and provide it, education does something rather different. It tells its 'customers', in so many words, 'you may want to study this, but we think you'd benefit from something else. You may want to go on studying Nazi Germany, which you enjoyed at A-level, and the idea of a module on mediaeval France may not seem so attractive. But we think you would be a better historian for doing it.

And we should know as we are the experts on history’.

This objection naturally appeals to university lecturers because it confirms the traditional view of their status; on the other hand there is a lot of truth in it. What position is the budding philosophy student in to say that she can’t be doing with that scary-looking stuff on epistemology, but practical ethics might float her boat? Or the first year specialist in English literature to choose never to study poetry or Jacobean drama? We might, though, be mindful of particular dangers in this line of thinking in the current climate. Difficulty can be marketed like anything else: as well as being reassuringly expensive a university might badge itself as Traditionally Difficult, with a Latin module compulsory for all in the first year and gowns to be worn to lectures. Hogwarts fans would love it.

The more serious problem is that this objection and its apparent repudiation of the market absolves the university from explaining why it does what it does, and why it teaches what it teaches. It is a take-it-or-leave-it approach that fails to notice its own basis in market philosophy. It assumes that students will appear as they always have done, not reflecting that they are lured precisely by the brand of tradition, advertised in prospectuses featuring ivy and quadrangles.

Now a market does not have to be thought of in this stark way: if you don’t like what you see on my stall, move on to another (there are lots more customers arriving, after all). Adam Smith famously wrote in *Wealth of Nations* of the human propensity to ‘truck, barter and exchange one thing for another’. We might take trucking more seriously. To truck is to have dealings with, negotiate, haggle, barter, be on familiar terms with. The *OED* includes ‘to walk about on petty business; to potter’ (adding ‘esp. dealings of an underhand or improper character’).

In other words the market is a forum where, sometimes rather unhurriedly, we explain the point and the benefits of what we have to offer, as well as where all manner of satisfying gossip or ‘crack’ takes place. We are not faced with the simple alternative of satisfying preferences by pandering to what the customers

currently and perhaps immaturely want, on the one hand, and forming preferences once they have yielded to our claim that we know best, on the other. The market is the extensive middle ground where arguments can take place, reasons be offered, traditions defended, new visions explored. Academics ought to be rather good at doing all this and, further, at explaining why they talk about education in the way they do rather than in the pseudo-language of brands, images, slogans and rhetoric (those underhand dealings that the *OED* records).

My not entirely creative point, then, is that academics should be prepared to spend more time explaining the traditional and other purposes of a university education in the market of the press and other media and in talking to parents and potential students. It is not easy to set out the reasons for employing a professor of palaeography, but no one else is likely to try. It is not easy to articulate the vision of university education as something which broadens your mind, expands your horizons and generally turns you into a more civilised person, without prompting people to ask ‘yes, but what’s the point of it, though?’ It is distinctly difficult to explain that part of why we have higher education is to preserve, explore and develop forms of rationality different from the prevailing instrumental kind. This, however, is what we have to go on doing, with ever-increasing persuasiveness, as the easy philistine case is pressed for dismissing the palaeographer and introducing modules in learning for entrepreneurship.

If we did this it would help the wider world understand what universities are for and why they matter, and win them more friends and allies against underfunding. It might also help our students to understand just why they are studying with us, a matter about which they are often naive. We need a ‘market’ in university education that involves fewer league tables, less image management, and a great deal more trucking.

This is an extended version of an article which appeared in the Durham University student paper, Palatinat, in January 2010.