THE SAUSAGE FACTORY

New, exciting, fresh, university year!
New, exciting, fresh, university cuts!

Access to higher education is already vastly unequal. The usual indicators of inequality such as class, age, ethnicity, ability and so on tend to determine who gets to go to university. Universities are not institutions whose role is critical thought. They are increasingly focused on the production of knowledge and skilled workers for exploitation on markets.

The Con-Dem government will hugely exacerbate these trends, imposing some of the most severe and regressive cuts to higher education funding in living memory, coupled with a removal on the cap on top-up fees recommended by former-BP exec Lord Browne in his review published today. Universities will likely charge a minimum of £6,000 when the government implements Browne’s recommendations. Both of these changes are aimed at further privatizing universities and further entrenching private markets in the academy: from fees and teaching to research funding.

These changes will continue the ongoing neo-liberalisation of education in the UK. This means the closing down of spaces for critical and non-instrumental thought (including the humanities, philosophy and other ‘blue-skies’ research), and the saddling of whole generations of students with average debts of £25,000. Lord Browne calls for state funding to be limited to science, technology, maths and engineering, which would lead to a massive crisis in the humanities and arts.

The government wants to go even further. They see opportunity for profit generation in selling public goods into private hands. All this of course fits with wider trends towards imposing the costs and insecurities of a crisis-ridden late-capitalism on the population at large, while privatizing the benefits. Governments were willing to use billions of pounds to bail out the banks, and now they are willing to hand over the whole university system to private, profit-making industry, whilst making students pay (much, much more) for it.

The Browne Review: let the market decide how much that degree is really worth

University managers have been arguing that fees should rise (in line with their astronomical salaries) for decades. Now the Browne Review calls for the cap on fees to be lifted, so that a market can be introduced and ‘the best’ degrees at ‘the best’ institutions can be sold at the highest price. Unpopular or unprofitable subjects and insti-
tutions will be left to go to the wall, as students continue further down the path towards being slaves to debt, and university education moves even closer to becoming just another form of skills training for the benefit of capitalist employers.

The Spending Review: universities will be even more bankrupt

While fees are set to rise, an equally poisonous impact is likely to be the privatisation of Universities in the wake of the supposed need to cut their funding. The government intends to shift the cost of higher education decisively from the State to individuals.

This means cuts of 64% to the current teaching budget - at a time when ever more students seek sanctuary from the precarity of the labour market by going to university. Students are being encouraged to see themselves as consumers seeking ‘value-for-money’ in a context where whole universities will be forced into bankruptcy. Lord Browne is relaxed about the prospect of competition forcing departments and whole universities to close.

Already overstretched staff will be required to do more teaching and more research. The arts, humanities and social sciences will be devastated as will any ‘non-profitable’ research and teaching. Whole departments or whole universities will go bankrupt, leaving students with no degree and nowhere to go. The kinds of research that will remain funded will be market and product orientated, probably involving more partnerships between private companies and universities. Expect to see more Shell-sponsored geology professors then.

While the UK was once a leader in international research breakthroughs, most commentators anticipate a ‘brain drain’ of the top researchers out of the country to other nations whose approach to funding is less regressive. Even the private and charity sectors will be unwilling and unable to fill the gap left by huge cuts in the higher education budgets. Within an already profoundly unequal education system, the privatisation of degrees and the raising of fees will mean that only the rich and a token handful of the disadvantaged will be granted the status of degree-holders.

Of the anti-logics of privatisation, we are already familiar: ‘the market’ (purported to be a collection of ‘rationally acting’ consumers) supposedly decides what is to be valued according to what is most efficient. This efficiency has a meaning far removed from its everyday use: it is more efficient to cut jobs and university places when there are over two million people unemployed, many with extensive skills, and many in need of education.

 Those activities which fail to generate profits are deemed inefficient and are cut. Funding for research already favours those projects whose market value and profitability can be easily measured; hence the need for researchers to stress the ‘impact’ of their research when applying for funding. This will only get worse.

 Who decides what is profitable, and therefore efficient? Large institutional investors, the very same ones who led the world into financial collapse and recession two years ago, the very same ones who needed billions of pounds of public money to clean up the mess they created. Big investors and are not stupid or evil - they just do whatever they can to make a profit, and this always leads to a massive crisis. It happened in finance, now universities are next.

What we can do

The Really Open University believes the university does not have to be like this. At last year’s event ‘What is a Really Open University?’ over 50 participants came up with radical visions of an alternative including: open, free, non-hierarchical, borderless and free of the false logic of competition.

This not only is preferable but, through collective social action, possible. This year we will continue to run and initiate exciting events and experiments exploring how we can create an alternative to our failed education system.

Look out our forthcoming reforms - a real alternative to the cuts!