

Investing in knowledge

[Francis Boorman](#) investigates what happened to learning for its own sake, and why education is now divisive as well as elitist

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Since the introduction of top up fees, an overall increase in the number of university applications is apparently masking a worrying trend uncovered recently by the Sutton Trust. A report released by the Trust suggests that students from lower income families are not being made aware of financial assistance available to them and are having their choice of university limited to those they can reach from home. Yet higher education minister Bill Rammell insists that 'the proportion of applicants from lower socioeconomic groups is increasing'. Confusion over the real effects of top up fees on potential applicants with little spare money at their disposal seems rife. The situation is set to become even more complicated if the cap on top up fees is increased in 2010.

Yet all these arguments about the exact number of people from which sections of society are now applying to which universities obscure a more fundamental problem: a university education is being marketed to potential applicants as a sound financial investment with a small loan now guaranteeing lifelong financial rewards. It is exactly this kind of argument which will stop people whose parents didn't go to university from wanting to do so. With greater numbers of graduates and the economy facing the possibility of a recession, £10,000 of debt is looking more daunting than ever. The financial sense of choosing to spend three years doing a history of art degree rather than training as a plumber is extremely debatable.

A recent report on 14-19 education published by the Nuffield Review suggested that the language of management now employed in schools (or 'education providers'), and the obsession with quantifying educational gains using 'performance indicators', has become detrimental to the standard of genuine intellectual enquiry that should be at the heart of what academic education is all about. Thinking about degrees as, first and foremost, a boost to future earnings is part of the same trend for conceiving of education as a marketplace for learning. By discussing the value of education in purely economic terms, the idea of education for its own sake is being devalued. The argument against top up fees being introduced in the first place faced this same problem of placing budgeting ahead of principles.

The worry that York will become a more elitist institution currently seems misplaced. The increase in funding for bursaries promised for next academic year suggests that, in financial terms, the needs of applicants from low income families are not being ignored. The findings of the Sutton Trust suggest that care must also be taken to properly publicise the funding available. And if, in 2010, the University increases tuition fees, bursary funding will be even more crucial to preventing rising inequality in who feels they can afford to apply. Yet none of these practicalities should be allowed to obscure the wider debate. Of course it is important that everyone in society gets the chance of a good education, but this will never happen if we lose sight of what education is for in the first place.



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