

A-level students must be told the whole truth about the value of a degree



Mis-selling of higher education is one of the least remarked upon scandals of our time.

To listen to ministers talk about university education, it is as if Britain has entered an academic arms race with the rest of the world. China's universities, we're told, are spewing out six million graduates a year: we must compete, or we're doomed. In the Blair years, a national target was set: half of all young people ought to enter higher education. They'd have to get into debt, but they were reassured it would be a worthwhile investment. Having some letters after your name meant going further in your careers and earning far more. Those without a degree, by implication, would enter the workplace at a distinct disadvantage.

It is surprising that David Willetts should continue this line of argument, because he is clever enough to know what simplistic nonsense it is. It is understandable for the Universities Minister to be in favour of studying, but the real picture of education in Britain is far more complex. The idea of a binary divide in the career prospects of graduates and non-graduates is not a picture that would be recognised by employers. In many lines of work, those who did not get the A-levels for university now have a future just as bright (or otherwise) as the graduates.

From the moment that John Major started to abolish student grants, the British government has been in the business of selling (rather than simply providing) higher education. Yes, studying costs, runs the argument, but it is an investment: what students pay is a small fraction of what they will get back.

Then came the proliferation of courses and institutions, from BA (Hons) in Golf Management at the University of the Highlands and Islands to Trade Union Studies at Blackpool College. The definition of a degree has changed massively, but the financial argument used for getting one has not changed at all.

When Mr Willetts trebled the cap on university fees, he justified this by arguing that a university degree will "on average boost your earnings by £100,000 over a lifetime". If true, that would – more or less – justify the average £40,000 of debt which is expected to face those who start college this autumn. But it doesn't take an A* in A-level maths to suspect that the £100,000 figure disguises a vast range of alternative scenarios, many of which imply disadvantage for those who, for whatever reason, give university a miss.

Last year the Government released a research paper that spelt it out. For doctors and dentists, a degree is a prerequisite. They will earn £400,000 more over a lifetime, as you might expect, having been fully trained for a well-paid profession. But for students admitted to less rigorous degrees, the premium quickly diminishes – especially for men. Those who graduate in the subjects I studied, history and philosophy, can expect to earn a paltry £35 a year more than non-graduates. For graduates in “mass communication” the premium is just £120 a year. But both are better value than a degree in “creative arts”, where graduates can actually expect to earn £15,000 less, over a lifetime, than those who start work aged 18.

With employment, it's not much better. The old joke – “What do you say to an arts graduate? 'Big Mac and fries, please'?” – has all too much resonance now. Of recent graduates, almost a third are in jobs that don't require anything more than GCSEs. One in 10 recent graduates is now on the dole. All youth unemployment is tragic, but there is something especially scandalous about young people who have been sold a vision of graduate life, only to find it was a piece of spin to sweeten the bitter pill of student loans. The mis-selling of higher education is one of the least remarked-upon scandals of our time.

The simplistic argument – that the brightest get the best grades and go to the best universities – would be more convincing if Britain had a meritocratic education system. But here, perhaps more than any other country, the quality of exam results are linked to background. For all the egalitarian aims of the comprehensive school system, it has produced the opposite: a system where a direct relationship can be drawn between pupils' exam results and their families' wealth. Scandalously few of those who live in our sink estates will have done much celebrating after their A-levels yesterday.

The league tables, showing the best state schools, bear a suspicious resemblance to prosperity indices. And this is not, to paraphrase Neil Kinnock, because British children from poor backgrounds are thick. It is strange how, after each set of A-level results, there is a uproar about how many pupils who qualified for free school meals are admitted into Oxford University – but less interest in how these children do so much worse at school, from primary years onwards. Employers have learnt that bright children don't necessarily have the best GCSEs.

The ministerial focus of education as an economic tool risks missing the larger point. David Cameron's Government is doing much to make the system work better. The most pernicious equation in public life, between wealth and GCSE results, cannot be found in the new breed of Academy schools. The Harris Academy group, which runs 13 schools in deprived inner-city boroughs, announced yesterday that it is sending pupils to Bristol University for maths, Warwick University for law and Imperial College for medicine. These sixth-formers would have enrolled at the school when it was a fledgling New Labour project; now there are hundreds of Academy schools. It is perhaps the most rapidly vindicated social experiment of modern times.

Even for undergraduates, things may be on the turn. Tuition at Britain's best universities has always ranked among the best in the world; it is the lower-ranking colleges that have tended to short-change students. Mr Willetts's decision to remove the cap on places for students with AAB at A-level should soon have universities competing for pupils with such grades. Next year, this will hold true for pupils with ABB results. Having introduced the bad side of a market system (fees), the proper side (competition for custom) will finally get under way.

By next year, all universities will be forced to release information on graduate employment rates for each course. This will help students work out if they are being conned. If all goes well, the number of good courses will expand, and the courses that serve neither students nor society will be exposed. And while there has been a dip in university applications, it has come from wealthier students. The offer of bursaries for students from the lowest-income families seems to be having the desired effect.

Much has been written about the "jilted generation" and how twentysomethings feel betrayed, saddled with debt and robbed of prospects. Unemployed graduates, all 130,000 of them, will be richly entitled to such resentment. Theirs may well end up being known as the transition generation, those sold university education for a hefty fee, before they were able to know what they were buying. But there is an upside to all this. If a degree is no guarantee of success in modern Britain, then the lack of one is no guarantee of failure. For those whose A-level results have precluded university, there is still all to play for.

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