

Oxbridge Academics React to Proposed UK Funding Cuts

Description

by Danny Byrne

The plot thickens.

All over the news in the UK today is the story of 681 Oxbridge academics coming together to sign a “strongly worded” letter demanding a public enquiry into the proposed changes to fees and funding set forth in the UK.

The full text of the letter, along with the names of all the signatories, is available on The Independent website here: www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letter-universities-left-to-fly-blind-2229347.html

Perhaps amongst the most meaningful passages is the following: “We note with dismay and alarm that universities are being forced to take major decisions, with unknown consequences, at a breakneck speed. We are being asked to “fly blind” over matters of the utmost importance in respect of our ability to continue to deliver world-class education and research.”

Certainly this seems to be a sharp contrast to the more direct action taken by students some months ago but still the coverage (rather than the letter itself) finds it difficult to focus on anything other than the fee hikes. Cuts in funding for the sector in the UK seem to have slipped by with scarcely a mention – although the Newsnight feature on the topic did include one Oxford academic mention concerns regarding cuts to teaching funding in the humanities. What happens when students paying these increased fees find that they cannot expect any further services for their money and that, in many cases, they may see cuts in services where the fee increases do not fully account for funding cuts? One of the most interesting trends to monitor will be the influence any of this has on migration of students to and from the UK.

David Willets was keen to point out that Cambridge have essentially proposed a means based approach to their fee hikes and reminded viewers that students will not be expected to pay anything back until after graduating and reaching the salary threshold of Â£21,000/year. He also stressed that not only Browne but Dearing and a prior exercise some 40 years ago all concluded that it would be a more appropriate model for a larger proportion of university funding to come via the students.

Still – one of the key messages in the letter from academics seems to be to do not so much with the nature, but the speed of response. Ultimately this “strongly worded” protest seems to suffer from the same muted effectiveness as that conducted by students last year – there is no reference to a meaningful alternative.

From my personal perspective I would like to know what the next letter is going to say – when this one is met with nothing more than political rhetoric – and indeed the viewpoint of some academics who perhaps chose not to put themselves forward as a signatory.

The government have a certain degree of momentum behind their funding cuts and are unlikely to

have an opportunity to do so again – it seems unlikely that without a solid proposal for an alternate plan that much is likely to happen here – it's back in the news again at least.