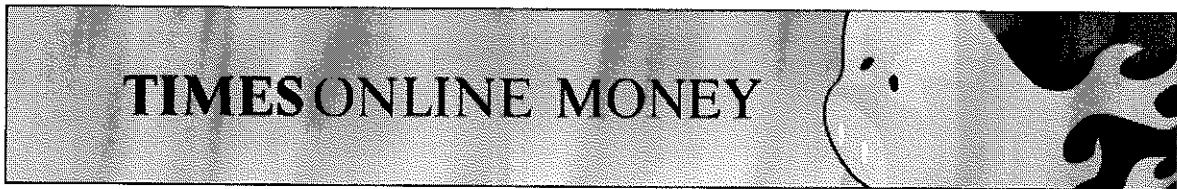


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March of the student dinosaurs

GABRIEL ROZENBERG

If these protesters were true radicals they would have demanded the right to pay more

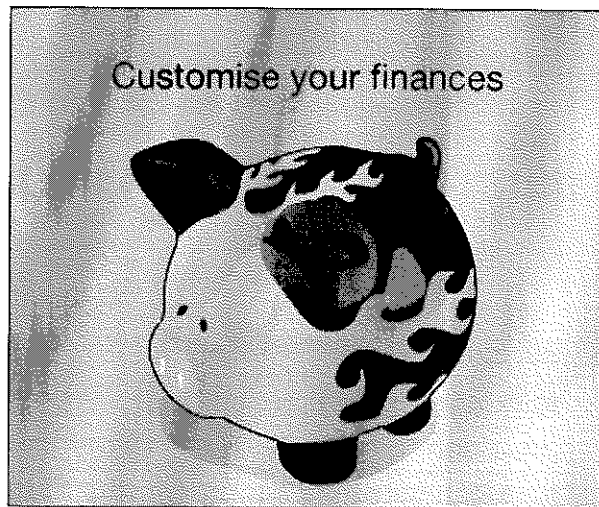
HOW WOULD you feel if I told you that reading this column would cost you £25,000? More than a little short-changed, I'd bet. But it does. You see, not so long ago I went to university and you, the taxpayer, footed almost the entire bill. Now I feel rather sheepish. I'm grateful to you for giving me the chance to sleep through lectures, drink subsidised beer and use my education to get a full-time job. But you hardly got much out of the deal.


Benevolent though you've been, there are plenty of youngsters out there who'd like to stretch you a bit further. Yesterday thousands of members of the National Union of Students dusted off their red flags and loudhailers to descend on London in protest against university top-up fees. Twenty-one years after the miners' strike ended, these are Scargill's children.

Their dreary demos have been going on ever since fees were introduced, which was incidentally my first year at university. At a grand a year, it was a sensational bargain — though of course that wasn't the real cost: that bill was being met by the taxpayer. I found the protests embarrassing in their lack of gratitude then, and I still do.

With top-up fees of up to £3,000 a year now upon us, the NUS once again trots out the well-worn battle cry: "Education is a right, not a privilege." It misses the point. Just because education is a right doesn't mean that it has to be free: it means that it has to be affordable. As long as no one is being shut out of education because they cannot afford it, society is doing its duty.

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And who could doubt that the new system is generous to a fault? Students can borrow money on terms that would make financial advisers choke on their cappuccinos: entirely interest-free, and you don't have to pay it back until you start earning. Stay feckless and idle, and you'll never have to stump up at all.

Here's what the NUS *should* be doing: pleading with universities to get out of the government funding game altogether. Students should demand to be charged the full cost of their education, perhaps £10,000 a year.

That may be about as likely as the McCartneys agreeing to give it one more try for the sake of the kids. But students should look at the bigger picture: our universities, once the envy of the world, are slowly, gracefully, declining into mediocrity, run down by a Government that can no longer afford to support them.

Funding per student has halved over the past 20 years, and the ratio of tutors to undergraduates has steadily worsened. Unis can't compete with the US where it matters most — in holding on to the academics of the next generation. It is no coincidence that all this year's academic Nobel Prizes were won by Americans.

But oodles more cash would be no use if the State still dished it out. Already, vice-chancellors speak of an inexorable rise in paperwork, as the bear hug of the Department for Education and Skills draws ever tighter. In an effort to cut red tape, which costs universities some £250 million a year, 15 separate government bodies that run higher education (all with baffling acronyms such as HESA, SBN and QAA) signed up to a "concordat" against bureaucracy. It committed them to reduce "unnecessary burdens" (always the worst sort), but boldly argued that "best practice" should be "encouraged and supported". For some reason, it took two years to agree.

Even so, it was utterly wrong. It called on the biggest beast in the acronym jungle — HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England — to intervene only where there is a risk of things going wrong financially or academically at a university. This policy is the equivalent of holding back failing students from sitting their exams until they are sure of passing. Since there is zero risk of going bankrupt, any pressure on universities to stay competitive evaporates.



The Government just doesn't realise that universities will improve only when they lock horns with one another. Instead, it sets capricious limits on the size of universities: so successful colleges must shut their doors on thousands of kids, who are then forced to settle for second best. This levelling down benefits no one. Meanwhile, universities are forced to fall in behind nationally negotiated pay deals, rather than competing for the services of the best dons by offering the best pay deal.

If students paid for the full cost of their degrees, and the State got out of the way, vice-chancellors would sit up and listen. They would be forced to keep courses lean, perhaps by making them shorter or offering new combinations of subjects. Indeed, the happiest students are the ones who pay the most. The Open University and the fully private University of Buckingham, which charges £10,000 a year for courses, came top in a survey of student satisfaction last month.

If there is still a role for state funding it is surely only in ensuring that no teenager is left behind. Universities that charge full fees would have more resources to put into scholarships for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It wouldn't happen overnight, but in the meantime the Government could build up endowments, helping universities to become the best of all worlds: fee-charging for all who can afford it, needs-blind to those who cannot.

As it stomps through Bloomsbury, the NUS whinges that education must not be treated as a commodity. It's time it stopped the sub-Marxist cant and got real: of course education is a commodity. The question is — what will you do to make it better?

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