



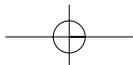
**Boris Johnson**

**Aspire Ever Higher:**

**University Policy for the  
21st Century**

**POLITEIA**

**A FORUM FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING**



# POLITEIA:

## A Forum for Social and Economic Thinking

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Boris Johnson

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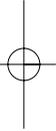
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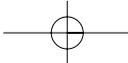




## The Author

Boris Johnson is Shadow Minister for Higher Education and has been Member of Parliament for Henley since 2001. Before that he was Editor of *The Spectator* (1999-2005), having been European Correspondent, Assistant Editor and then Chief Political Correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph* between 1989 and 1999. He has recently published *The Dream of Rome* (April 2006).





## Introduction: University numbers – costs and benefits?

One of my first acts on being born in 1964 was to attend a university, since my parents were both students, and I wanted to be close to my mother at the time. I acquired a lifelong knack of sleeping through lectures, and it was an idyllic experience for me and for the rest of the student body, who then made up only 4 per cent of the cohort of 18-30 year-olds.

For the next four decades higher education in Britain continued on a path of vertiginous expansion, with colossal increases in the number of men, and even more colossal increases in the number of women, though I doubt very much that the number of babies born to undergraduates increased at anything like the same rate. With 43 per cent of 18-30 year-olds now at university, the state funding attracted by individual students has shrunk to the point where a child would probably be considered a luxury.<sup>1</sup>

There is, indeed, a widespread view that the overall university experience has deteriorated in the 42 years since I first blissfully snoozed through a tutorial. There are those who say that more has meant worse. They say that the system has led, in the wrist-slitting valedictory of one former Tory Higher Education Spokesman, to “mass cultivation on the cheap, with ever more students herded into ever-expanding institutions to graze, untutored, on ever thinner pastures.”<sup>2</sup>

Academic pay has dismally failed to keep pace with that of other professionals: doctors, lawyers, and, of course, MPs. As for the students themselves, it must be arithmetically inevitable that the academic quality of the average student has declined. If 400,000 are graduating every year rather than 40,000, and if you assume that many of the extra 360,000 have been generally recruited from further to the left of the binomial curve of academic ability, then the cohort of UK students is, on average, less able than the body of graduates of 20 years ago, which was in turn less able than the graduate body of 30 years ago, which was less able than the graduate body of 40 years ago – on average.

This might not matter at all, of course, unless it was also the case that the interests and performance of the best students and colleges were being damaged by the expansion, and a consequent tendency toward the mean; and that, alas, is exactly what people believe to be happening. I don't want to start an argument now about dumbing-down of degree courses, or grade inflation in finals, though I suspect that both have been taking place, and I was struck, recently by the supercilious tones in which one leading engineer recently described to me the simplicity of the physics finals papers at one Russell Group university compared to those he had sat 30 years ago. Piece of cake, these days, none of that really crunchy maths, he said.

<sup>1</sup>In 1963/4, 216,000 students were in higher education (includes FT HE/FE/Teacher Training) and total government spending was £2.05bn (grants to HE made by the UGC in 04/05 prices). Spending per student was £9,491.

In 2003/4, 2,369,005 students were in higher education (includes FT/PT HE/FE/Teacher Training) and total government spending was £9.23bn (HEFCE & research grants from Research Councils but excluding tuition fees, private donations and assisted places schemes such as AIM Higher etc)

Spending per student was £3,897 (this figure is not exact and may be slightly unbalanced as a result of trying to directly compare two somewhat opaque data sets – more likely the figure will be somewhat higher, say c. £4,500 mark).

<sup>2</sup>George Walden, *Lucky George: Memoirs of an Anti-Politician*, Penguin Books Ltd, London (1999) p.289.

Boris Johnson

I don't want a row about dumbing-down partly because I am not sure how well I would do in physics finals myself; but mainly because I don't need it to make my central point, which is that the university experience has decayed. Just look at the money. The unit of resource – government funding per student – has declined from £8,000 to £5,000 over the last ten years; student-teacher ratios have climbed from 10 to one to 19 to one. Money is so short that in many of our leading universities it is not possible to offer three full terms of teaching.

Among the general public there is huge scepticism about whether all these 2.3 million students *need* to be at university, and a general belief that many of the courses they are doing are a waste of time, or worse than a waste of time. For more than ten years it has been a standby for newspaper polemicists to attack media studies, or golf course management, or surf studies, or equine management: in fact, I have a feeling I may once have written something on those lines. And the public now has evidence before it – from Swansea University – that some students doing arts courses at some universities are in fact financially worse off as graduates than if they had not bothered to go to university at all. Why, O why, say the commentators in the popular press, are our kids racking up these huge debts, and using all these taxpayers' millions, when what many of them should be doing is acquiring *skills*?

In the words of every saloon bar analysis of higher education of the last ten years, what we need is fewer graduates, and more plumbers. It is not a new thought.

For generations the British ruling classes have tried to persuade young people that there is "parity of esteem" between academic and vocational courses. As Alison Wolf illustrates in her brilliant analysis *Does Education Matter?*<sup>3</sup>, it has been a constant theme of British politicians and industrialists for the last 130 years that we lack the right technical education. And yet every time we try to pretend that vocational qualifications are just as good as academic ones – every time we say that NVQs are as good as GCSEs – the maddeningly self-interested young people of today tell us to pull the other one. NVQs were so universally disdained that they were merged into GCSEs and then scrapped altogether; and for all the warning clamour about the fool's gold of higher education, the numbers of those wanting to benefit from it have been climbing inexorably – and, generally speaking, those who take the decision to enter higher education are right or at least rational.

It is high time that we Conservatives mounted a thorough-going defence of higher education, its students and teachers, and the benefits it can bring.

As it happens, I think the sceptics may sometimes be right about the narrow economic justification. The correlation between GDP and the rate of participation in higher education is not as clear as you might expect. Switzerland contrives to have the highest GDP in the west and hardly any Swiss seem to go to university – only a third of the OECD average<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter?* Penguin Books Ltd, (London, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> 38% of the Swiss age cohort attend university compared to 63% in the US.

And yet I am afraid I think the Swiss are missing a trick. If you had to suggest a global industry with growth potential, what would you pick? The Internet is wonderful, but not that easy to make money from. Agriculture is not looking good; there are roughly six automobiles made for every five potential consumers: steel, shipping, mining – they are all in trouble. But look at universities. With a worldwide student population of 110 million, and with each degree costing, let us say, \$5,000, you are looking at a total universities sector worth \$550 billion – not far short of the entire Indian economy; and it is growing at a dizzying rate.

I congratulate my Labour opposite number Bill Rammell, who recently visited China, following a Tory trail-blazing mission. He will have found that the Chinese already have 16 million students in full-time higher education, and 23 million if you include part-time, and it is the growth in Chinese demand that currently means there are 53,000 Chinese in this country – paying pretty useful fees, by the way. It is Chinese expansion which has also inspired British universities to go out and build UK-badged campuses in China itself, and it is notable that British academics are showing tremendous entrepreneurial flair and drive in those areas where they have been most left to their own devices and are not directly controlled by the state – the recruitment of graduates and international students.

We attract the Chinese because Britain has a global reputation for being good at higher education, not least since we are widely assumed to speak English. If you chose to look at it in a narrowly economic way, you could say that it was one of those service industries at which we excel, and the sector is thought to be worth about £45 billion overall. But even if some of these economic claims must be taken with a pinch of salt, my defence is not solely based on a narrow calculation of what HE adds directly and quantifiably to UK Plc.

### **The idea of a university – from reverence to cynicism**

I believe in the liberating and enriching (spiritually and materially) power of education, as an end in itself, and as a good in itself. Tony Blair said the priority of the Labour Government was going to be education, education, education. Well, I don't think I am giving any hostages to fortune or making any spending commitments when I say that we'll have exactly the same priorities, except not necessarily in that order.

We should never forget the power of education to transform people's lives, and how comparatively recently mass education was introduced. You can make an unanswerable case that higher education has played a decisive role in the emancipation and empowerment of women – the numbers of female students went from 41,000 in 1964 to an astonishing 950,000 in 2004 – and higher education has been the yeast in the rise of the British middle classes. When we complain that too many people have, or aspire to have, a university degree, we might as well complain that too many people now belong to the middle class.

*Boris Johnson*

To see how recent is this achievement, spool back 100 years to the greatest story of university admissions. It is of course Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, though I must say I have been shocked, in discussing this sacred text with English literature students, to find how Obscure Jude seems to remain.

What was the event in his life that stopped him becoming, if not Jude the Celebrity, then Jude the moderately well-known? It was that he failed to get into Christminster, which is Thomas Hardy's name for Oxford, and what makes the novel so remarkable is that we, the readers, are filled with a sense of outrage and disgust at his rejection. More than 100 years before Gordon Brown ignited the Laura Spence affair, it was a legitimate subject for tragic meditation that a stonemason had failed to get into Oxford. Written when only 0.9 per cent of the cohort went to university, *Jude the Obscure* is the first great literary treatment of the idea that talent can be wasted by exclusion from university.

But if you want an indication of how far and how fast education had moved by the time *Jude* came to be written in 1890, let us spool back another 150 years, to about 1742, when we find Thomas Gray standing in Stoke Poges churchyard and looking at the mouldering graves of the village. He too is struck by the waste of potential that is buried beneath...

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear,  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air*

*Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid etc...*

But in 1742 the problem wasn't that the lack of access to university. The tragedy of the rural poor was that they didn't have any education at all.

*knowledge with her ample page,  
rich with the spoils of time did ne're unroll.  
Chill penury repressed their noble rage,  
and froze the genial currents of the soul etc etc*

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth  
a youth to fortune and to fame unknown.  
Fair science frowned not on his humble birth  
and melancholy marked him for her own.*

Now that thought – that natural talent has been frustrated through lack of education – seems to be an 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thought. We may think it an obvious poetic trope, but I can't find any sign of it in Shakespeare, let alone the Greek and Latin classics. It would be wrong to say that Gray's elegy is indignant, or a manifesto, or a call to arms. It is a sentimental and complacent piece of exquisite gloom. But it was followed by prodigious efforts to provide education for those who had been deprived. Partly it was the work of government, partly of the church and friendly

societies – the little platoons of Burke – but above all the force that began the work of educating the British people, the force that I wish to place at the centre of this argument, was the beautiful, irresistible and fundamentally benign force that is responsible for most of human development and growth – namely the simple desire of parents that their children, if possible, should do as well as or better than them, and, if possible, no worse than, or indeed ever so slightly better than, other people's children. That was the great natural flywheel that powered the educational revolution, and if I were to make a political point I would say that it tends to be Conservatives who believe it is the job of government to stand back before this force in a state of admiring awe, and it tends to be left-wingers who think that this force should be trammelled, constrained or otherwise mediated for the good of "society".

So powerful was that revolution, at any rate, that by the time Hardy came to write of educational injustice in before World War One, he complained not about access to primary education, or secondary education, but tertiary education; and that must count as progress.

Even as Jude is lying on his deathbed, he gasps to Arabella, "I hear there is soon going to be a better chance for such helpless students as I was. There are schemes afoot for making the university less exclusive, and extending its influence..."

He was right. By 1938, the percentage of 18-30 year olds at university had risen to 3 per cent. And only 50 years after the wretched death of Jude, we have the beginnings of the great expansion and Jim Dixon, the grammar school boy whose academic potential is recognised and encouraged by the system so that he goes to university and becomes *Lucky Jim*. We are now in the wonderful world of the redbrick university and the campus novel, and already – at the outset of the expansion – we can detect a certain cynicism about the merit of what is being studied. Jude the Obscure is full of reverence for learning and blubbing at the beauty of the spires, but one of the central jokes of *Lucky Jim* is that the young tutor despises his professor and thinks that his chosen field – Merrie England – is one of the nastiest and most miserable periods in history, and only produces a lecture on this awful subject because he hopes to get tenure.

By the time we reach Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, in 1975, the cynicism has become overpowering. The university population was still in those days only about 7 per cent of the cohort, but there is a bleak repulsion in Bradbury's description of the academics and their courses, culminating in the sociology faculty meeting at Watermouth University and its endless Marxist disputation about whether the tea-ladies can take part in the discussions.

In less than 75 years, from *Jude* to *The History Man*, the idea of a university has mutated from a sacred honey-hued Elysium to a hellhole of sex-crazed jargon-spouting leftie academics with dope-filled parties, cheap wine, and essentially fraudulent academic disciplines: and that second stereotype has become so powerful that I believe it still affects our thinking about universities, right up to the Tory policy at the last election.

Boris Johnson

### What should Conservative policy be?

For those of you who may have forgotten, the essentials of Conservative policy at the last election were to stop expanding student numbers and to scrap a raft of unspecified “mickey mouse” degrees. The objective was to reserve scarce taxpayers’ money for “real students” doing “real degrees”, and to forbid universities from charging for their services, even though they are, and technically always have been, independent bodies outside the public sector. Whatever the merits of this idea, it could not be said to have been successful with academics, and it was not even popular with the voters of middle Britain.

That in a way is surprising, since you might have thought it would chime nicely with the prejudices of the huge numbers of people who never went to university, and can’t quite understand what it is these young people get up to. If you read the obits, you will find, day after day, the lives of extremely distinguished and intellectually accomplished people who went to the university of life. In the last week we have had Stanley Hiller, 81, revolutionary designer of helicopters, Joseph Tanner, 78, master printer, KC Harrison OBE, 90, Librarian of the City of Westminster, Jay Presson Allen, 84, screenwriter and playwright, Sir Jack Cater, 84, Chief Secretary of Hong Kong, Monica Poels, 82, who founded a postal cassette library for the blind, John Bridges, 87, BBC radio producer who promoted *Beyond the Fringe*, Walter Puggy Pearson, 77, who created freeze-out poker, and many others, none of whom had the benefits of higher education. Think of the millions of others, the huge mass of ageing baby-boomers who missed the expansion of higher education, and who must be slightly resentful of all these youngsters who think they are somehow superior because they have a “degree”. Why didn’t they like the Tory policy? And what about the huge numbers of young people, who themselves think there are too many students being paid to do courses, still very largely at the taxpayer’s expense?

I had an insight into the answer when I gave a speech recently at Exeter University, and a girl put her finger on something that we all agree is a problem. “The trouble is that everybody has a degree these days, so you have to get one, otherwise the employers won’t want to look at you.” At which point the entire audience of 150 students started saying, “yeah, there were too many students around these days, what we needed was more plumbers”, and so on.

“OK”, I said, “hands up all those who wish they had never embarked on a university course”, and they hummed and hawed, apart from one archaeologist who said he wished he had done something more practical, and it hit me that we are all capable of having general criticisms of higher education, and how there is too much of it. But those general thoughts may be very different from our own individual calculations about our lives.

We may read worrying papers from Swansea University, telling us that our children won’t necessarily benefit from a degree, but the human race is composed of incurable optimists. We are prepared to gamble that we, or our children, will be transformed by the university experience, just as we are willing to gamble on the

Lottery, though the calculation is in fact a million times more rational than buying a Lottery ticket.

We know that employers want degrees, and that is in many cases the decisive point. We know that it is nothing to do with our skills set, or what we have learned. It's about who you are. It's what economists call a positional good. Your educational achievements are the one acceptable way of sorting you out from other people. Your place of graduation and your degree are a vital sign of who you are and where you are going. Universities are brands and people need to have the imprimatur of the brand, and there is simply nothing we can do to persuade them otherwise.

I certainly don't believe in some government target of 50 per cent university admissions, but that is because I don't believe in targets or quotas or indeed in many of the other positively harmful instruments that are currently used to control universities. But by the same token, I certainly don't believe in some mad plan to try to compel a certain proportion of people to stick to vocational courses and thereby reduce university numbers. We've seen how people will take the academic route, rather than the vocational route, if given the choice. We've seen that NVQs were no good; and the reason the numbers taking A-level and university entrance have continued to rise is less to do with government policy than with that ancient, noble and ineradicable British lust – the desire to keep up with the Joneses.

We're a nation that believes in bettering ourselves by comparison with others, and it strikes me as odd that the Tory party can have seemed to stand in the way of that self-betterment. We sounded crabby about people's desire to advance and improve their lot. We sounded hostile to students. We seemed to be placing an inhibition on the freedom of independent academic institutions – in the matter of their fund-raising – that was completely un-Tory, and it was based on a fundamental misreading of human nature.

Look at France, where parents are desperate for their children to pass the academic and not the vocational baccalaureate. Look at what happened when poor old Berlusconi tried to boost the Italian technical colleges and reduce university access. Look at the United States, the most vibrant economy in the world, where the numbers of students starting college are continuing to rise even though the participation rate is 60 per cent. For government now actively to restrict access to university, and to try to divert people into vocational courses, would be a bizarre piece of totalitarian economics. It would amount to a gross interference with university admissions, and it would be to take the same condescending and catastrophic stance as T Tetuphenay, the Master of Biblioll College, who rejects Jude's application in the following terms.

“Sir, I have read your letter with interest and judging from your description of yourself as a working man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. Yours faithfully, T. Tetuphenay.”

*Boris Johnson*

If we want to understand why the Tory policy did not sweep the country at the last election, it was because we seemed to be taking a position that was not so very far removed from that of the Master of Biblioll. It's no use saying to people – "it's all right, sonny, you can be a stonemason, or you can pack my bags at the supermarket checkout while I go off and be a lawyer". Even if we thought it right that we should tell people to stick to being stonemasons, there is the practical objection: how do you physically stop people enrolling for mickey mouse courses without crass invasions of academic freedom? You can't. And then there is a moral objection.

It is true that we no longer have socially provocative novels about the agonies of those who don't get into university, but there are still plenty of Judes out there in Obscurity. HE remains overwhelmingly middle class. It is true that all groups of society now send more kids to university, but the proportions are amazingly static. In 1990 77 per cent of children from socio-economic group A made it to tertiary education and 14 per cent from socio-economic group D. Sixteen years later the proportions are exactly the same.

In fact if you were to divide the cohort of current students into four quadrants - bright rich, less bright rich, bright poor, less bright poor - then the group that has really done well out of the post-1992 expansion has been the less bright rich.

As David Willetts recently explained in discussing educational opportunities, canals of opportunity seemed to open up in the 1980s, with the sale of council houses and the widening of share ownership, and those canals now seem to be freezing up again. As I have argued throughout this address, education is by far the best natural solvent of social rigidities, and we all need to think carefully and imaginatively about how schools can create opportunity, and how we can use workshops and other techniques pioneered by the Sutton Trust to rope in those non-traditional students.

Whatever one thinks of grammar schools, there seems to be consensus on two points: first that in the 1950s they did indeed help children from modest backgrounds to get on and up and to the best universities, and second that there is no question of re-imposing them on the British educational landscape. We therefore need to find other types of school, other ways of helping poor, bright kids and it would be very peculiar if the British ruling classes, many of whom are prepared to submit their own six-year old children to brutal Darwinian tests in order to get them in to fancy fee-paying schools, were to set their faces entirely against academic selection at any age. If 11 is too young, what about 13? Or 15? Or 16? I only ask.

And if the answer to my question is negative, and we can't do much to change the school system, then we must be especially careful, in reforming higher education, not to prejudice the chances of the potential Judes out there. That is why the great question for HE now is how we can keep this momentum and sense of success, and yet address the problem with which we began, and allay the growing anxieties about the quality of the UK university experience.

How can we make sure people don't waste their time at university, when they might be better off getting stuck into a job or training? How can we attract and keep good academics and stop the top talent being siphoned off to America? How can we make sure that the system is properly funded? How can we help UK universities retain their international reputation? What role, if any, should government have in making sure that courses are as challenging and exams as demanding as they used to be?

### **The future**

Without setting out an exact manifesto, I can give some broad indications of what could be done. The universities need a three-pronged approach:

#### *Proper funding*

When Jude the Obscure was turned down by Christminster he worked out that he would have to save for 15 years in order to be able to afford it. That was a shameful waste of talent. Yet when I went to university 90 years later, I had no tuition fees and spent my maximum grant foolishly – not very equitable either.

This is not the moment to discuss whether or not it would be a good idea to raise the £3,000 cap on the variable fees, since the new arrangements have yet to be applied, and any lifting of the cap would involve – under the present structure – spending a lot of Treasury money, and goes far beyond my present brief.

What we can say is that there is an overwhelming consensus in the HE sector that funding needs what I shall delicately call further reform, and that the problem is urgent if British universities are to remain globally competitive. Everyone in academic life agrees – as do I – that there is scope for a different approach: a system where, as Robbins in 1963 suggested, once the habit of going to university catches on, the burden of cost is met by beneficiary as well as the taxpayers. The question is how to transform that Vice-Chancellorial certainty into a political consensus, and the only way to do that is to ensure that whatever arrangement we come up with does not discriminate against poor Jude, but encourages and helps him, and also – and this will be the difficult bit – does nothing to deter those very many who are not poor but who are certainly not rich, and who may be planning to leave university and make their careers in relatively modestly paid but vital jobs in the public sector.

It will take time to complete this reform, and it will be difficult. I foresee a 20 year period of psychological reconditioning in the way we think about universities and their funding. We also need to think more creatively about tax breaks, and how to build up alumni donations, and endowments. For all those who think this is heresy – and they are many – I would point them to the contrast in health between the higher education systems in France and Germany, overwhelmingly funded and heavily controlled by the state. Of the age range, 39% in France and 36% in Germany go into higher education, whereas in America 63% go into higher education – and the US is also a honey pot for able academics who can join a super-star 'league'

*Boris Johnson*

### *Less interference*

The universities are not part of the public sector. In theory, at least, they are independent institutions.

But over the last 50 years they have willingly collaborated in their own nationalisation to the point where academics have their own national pay scales on the lines of the Royal College of Nursing and a union which is prepared to disrupt exams with strike action in favour of a larger share of the variable fees whose very existence the union opposes on ideological grounds – a moral paradox that is probably only capable of resolution if you are a politics lecturer.

Of course the state has a huge and legitimate role in higher education. The fate of our universities is of colossal strategic national importance, and whatever the advantages of the American system of funding we should never forget that state funding, in America is higher as a percentage of GDP than state funding in the UK.

But there could be real benefits from a tactical withdrawal, by government, from some areas. I believe in academic freedom, as defined in 1957 by the late supreme court justice Felix Frankfurter, which is the freedom to decide on academic grounds what to teach, how to teach it, who should teach it and whom to admit for study. As I never tire of saying, when it comes to academic freedom, Ich bin ein Frankfurter. So let me ask some questions, in a musing sort of way. Is it really right that the Quality Assurance Agency should blizzard universities with requirements about “ethics”, and then take absolutely no interest in what seems to be a pretty blatant grade-inflation scandal at De Montfort? Is it really the role of HEFCE, a government agency, to tell successful universities whether or not they can expand? Do we have the right system for research funding, and what effect is it having on academics and their ability to teach?

### *Higher standards*

Of course I believe in equity. I believe in fairness. But I don't believe in equality, and the attempt to impose it in education has been pretty disastrous. Human beings may be equally endowed with dignity and rights but they are not academically equal, and do not have the same academic needs. We are deceiving ourselves if we pretend that all universities are equal and all courses equal.

We can't possibly mean it. Not even socialists really mean it. When Gordon Brown denounced Oxford for not admitting Laura Spence, he was implicitly admitting the existence of a hierarchy of excellence in which Oxford is at or near the top, and the point about hierarchies of excellence is that they are naturally and inevitably occurring human structures. Government cannot flatten out those hierarchies, nor should it attempt to do so, and the best way to encourage excellence is to get the funding right, and then stand back and let students and institutions do the rest.

Government can make sure that students have the knowledge to make the most informed choices about what is best for them, and that they are aware of key data

such as, for instance, the 30 per cent income premium attracted by graduates in science; and if they decide not to go to university, for whatever reason – and of course there will be many brilliant people who decide it is not for them – then government can make sure that there are plenty of good vocational options available.

And if there are plenty of bright people who make a rational decision not to go to university, there will also be plenty of less academically promising types who end up getting degrees, and plenty of people who end up doing jobs that have no relation whatever to their course. Provided no one is deterred by the cost, I do not think we should be worried by these apparent anomalies and imperfections in a system that will work best through individual experiment and choice, and I certainly don't think it a matter for anxiety if a plumber ends up with a degree in psychology or, indeed, classics.

Rather than trying to shrink the HE sector, we would do much better looking at the problems in schools, where the real crisis in science and maths is to be found, and above all the 44 per cent of young people who are neither in education or training of any kind. That is the real disaster, far more pernicious economically socially, culturally – for them and for the country than a swelling universities sector. In so far as there is a Treasury-driven concept that the universities must justify every penny of investment through a narrow calculation of their economic output, then I reject it, because there is more to life, and more to the health and happiness of this country than our per capita GDP or how much tax we are able to bring to the groaning tithe barn of Gordon Brown. It happens to be true that university graduates continue to earn considerably more than non-graduates, and it happens to be true that universities make a huge contribution to the economy. But in introducing young people to argument, and reason, and logic, and in showing them that the problems and controversies of today have old antecedents, we are giving them a university education that will statistically enable them to live longer in better health and avoid going to prison, but also, more importantly, enable them better to understand their country and their lives. That is why I defend HE irrespective of the economic advantages. Because it's not about the economy, stupid; It's about civilisation. I finally defend the importance of higher education as an end in itself.

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Higher education is in a perilous state. Our universities, short of money and denied the freedoms they need, are subject to constant bureaucratic intervention. Strapped for cash and centrally controlled, they are under unremitting pressure to trade standards for numbers. And as the Government extends its power, it further usurps academic freedoms and threatens yet further decline.

Boris Johnson, the Shadow Minister for Higher Education, proposes a different approach. Higher education must be valued for itself and for the benefits it brings to each individual. Universities must be set free of state control. High standards must prevail. A fresh approach to funding is needed. Above all, freedom must be restored.

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