
Thursday 23 August 2018

**Increased ‘marketisation’ of Higher Education
will inevitably lead to universities falling into bankruptcy.**

Treating universities just like businesses will increase the prospect of some falling towards bankruptcy, according to Stefan Collini. The Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge was speaking today about the increased ‘marketisation’ of higher education with Susan Stewart, Chair of the Open University in Scotland, at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

“At some point we may see an institution declared on the brink of bankruptcy, as market logic dictates, and forced either to close or merge with another,” he explained. “Indeed, in recent years, governments have tended to treat universities as though they were failing, nationalised industries—and the reality is, of course, that they’re not failing, they’re not nationalised, and they’re not an industry.”

Collini believes that the effect of increased marketisation can be seen in university admissions. “In the UK we have always regarded universities as selective—we talked colloquially of ‘getting in to’ a particular university,” he said. “Now, by and large, universities are *recruiting* institutions, because they crave the fees that students bring.

“As universities higher up the chain expand their numbers, institutions further down - desperate to maintain income - have to make up their numbers with applicants who are less well-qualified.” The spread of unconditional offers, he believes, reflects some institutions’ “panicky anxiety of getting hold of and retaining enough students”.

Looking to the future, specifically in England, Collini sees the “differentiation of fees between different institutions and, before long, the prices of individual courses”, the removal of “eligibility

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for student loans to those courses judged to have an unsatisfactory record of post-graduate employment” and a rise in both student complaints and litigation against universities.

Is there an alternative? “The election of a Corbyn-led Labour Government may change things but, thus far, I think the Labour Party have been shamefully quiet on what the future shape of higher education might look like, let alone whether they would abolish some of the greater idiocies like the Teaching Excellence Framework,” Collini said.

“Labour, surely, ought to recognise that allowing for-profit institutions to cream off public money, by charging high fees to students who are provided with publicly-backed loans, is fundamentally antipathetical to their Party’s founding values. But one of the several difficulties Labour faces, assuming it ever does come into power, is the risk of being seen as the party that will reduce overall student numbers, because this will seem as though it denies access to those from the least privileged backgrounds.”

Collini insisted he was not driven by “nostalgic yearning” for earlier times. “We should be trying to ensure that those now entering university are not cheated of their legitimate entitlement to an education, that they’re not palmed off with some kind of second-rate training, something thought by right-wing policy formers and home counties dinner wisdom as ‘good enough for the likes of them’.

“The more we treat universities as institutions that are simply competitors with each other - whether locally, nationally or internationally - the more the prospect of failing becomes a reality,” he said. “If you read Government White Papers of the last two or three years, this is explicitly endorsed; the Government and the Office for Students (formerly the Higher Education Funding Council) have ‘no remit’ to save universities financially should they fall into bankruptcy. And that *will* be a consequence of increased marketisation.”

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