

THE DEATH OF THE UNIVERSITY, ENGLISH STYLE

Nick Couldry and Angela McRobbie

Something important died on 12 October 2010: the idea of the university in England.

Perhaps 'received its death warrant' would be more accurate than 'died'. For there are still some weeks left in which to challenge the fate that the Browne Report proposed for our university system. But that requires looking closely at the mechanisms Browne proposes.

The Browne Report says it's about funding 'a sustainable funding solution for the future' of higher education. It calls for more investment and offers a new mechanism for generating investment, by putting 'choice . . . in the hands of the students'.

Who could object to more, and better, choice for students? We certainly don't. That is why it is important to understand that the new funding mechanism Browne proposes is only very partially about choice.

Browne proposes, and the Government accepts, that government financial support for universities' teaching infrastructure will be removed, and replaced by the income from student fees, received in the form of a government payment that graduates will repay back later through the tax system, if their earnings are high enough. Let's leave aside so-called 'priority' courses for the moment, and ask what are the likely effects of this revolution in English universities' general funding model? Government will save a lot of money, and many will celebrate this, but the long-term costs of those savings will be both subtle and deep.

First, universities' financial planning will be thrown into uncertainty, affecting their forward decisions on the degrees they provide. It will

become increasingly difficult to ensure continuity of quality and the maintenance of standards when income cannot be predicted.

Second, students may begin to choose degrees on the basis of the earnings capacity a degree will give them. Only two types of student will be relaxed about their choice: those with high parental resources behind them, and those choosing degrees (maybe a leading finance or business degree?) who may believe that such a degree will guarantee them large salaries in the City, though this is now less guaranteed than before.

Third, over the longer-term, the range of degrees most universities offer will be narrowed. If university finance is largely (for some institutions exclusively) driven by student fee income, and student decisions narrowly driven by calculations of future earnings, how easy will it be in 10 years time to propose a new degree in philosophy, art history, or a language not on the government's list of 'strategically important' languages? Will the result really be more choice?

Two types of course will be protected from these new pressures: courses which government deems a national priority (medical, certain other science, technology and health care courses, some languages); and non-priority courses in richer universities that those universities decide to cross-subsidise. But universities and colleges that don't teach 'priority' courses will have little chance of generating the reserve income for such subsidies – even if they survive the new funding regime. Browne recognises that a consequence of his reforms is that some universities will come under pressure to close.

Unless resisted, Browne's proposals are likely, over time, to narrow the range of degree courses offered to students, so they become increasingly dominated by courses that are work-skills-oriented or carry high social prestige. Elite universities may be able to withstand these pressures, but only because they can charge the highest fees: we don't believe the resulting implications of this for inequality of access to higher education can be mitigated in a country that lacks the USA's century-old system of university endowments.

Our conclusion as two academics proud to teach in non-priority areas (the arts, humanities and social sciences) is that some major principles of the English education system are now under threat. There is the basic principle that governments support universities to provide a wide range of courses giving access at the highest level to

the full range of human knowledge, understanding and creativity. Also under threat is the principle that, through this broad idea of the university, young people have the opportunity to develop their full intellectual and creative potential, regardless of family wealth. Browne appears to believe that a system for distributing resources based on individual market choice will somehow generate the university system that society needs (and you thought neoliberalism was dead!).

Yet there has been too little debate so far on this deeper threat to the university system represented by the Coalition's response to the Browne report. One explanation for that lack of debate is old-fashioned divide-and-rule. As Browne says, he has introduced a 'more dynamic system of funding', which means that in the short term it may not be in, for example, Russell Group universities' interests to challenge what is proposed.

It is all universities however – and the inclusive idea of the university for which England has until now been internationally admired – that, in the long run, will be diminished by the reforms now under way. The London march on Wednesday 10 November 2010 was just the first stage in opening up the wider debate that is needed.

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Culture Machine invites its readers to join in the debate called for by Couldry and McRobbie in 'The Death of the University, English Style'. We are seeking contributions in the form of short think pieces or micro-essays of 500-1000 words on any aspect of:

- the future of higher education in England and the UK;
- the position of the arts, humanities and social sciences within the university;
- the role and nature of the university in a democratic society.

Please email all contributions to Gary Hall at gary@garyhall.info, remembering to include your full name and academic affiliation (if any). (If, for institutional or other reasons, you would prefer to have your piece published anonymously, we would be happy to accommodate this.) All contributions will be reviewed by the Editorial Board on a rolling basis, with those accepted for publication being made immediately available on the Culture Machine site.