

British university system faces collapse

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Half of Britain's 150 universities must close down if the system is to remain viable, according to a senior academic.

Sir Roderick Floud has proposed a plan for mass redundancies and closures to be adopted by the government in which he criticised the “messy, muddled non-system of higher education” as “inefficient” and in need of root-and-branch reform. Floud is the former head of Universities UK, an advocate for universities, and has run several universities.

“I believe that we have too many universities, that they are trying to do too many different things, and that the way we fund their research is fundamentally flawed,” Floud wrote in *Times Higher Education*. “We don't need two or more universities in each of our major cities, glowering at each other and competing to attract the attentions of businesses and local authorities. Why does Leeds or Sheffield or Oxford, for example, need two vice-chancellors, registrars or groups of governors?

“In London, the situation is even more bizarre, with some 40 universities within the M25 [the London Orbital Motorway] and more arriving by the day. We have conservatoires and art colleges which could perfectly well be faculties of a larger university,” Floud continued.

Merging departments would eliminate the “duplication and waste” of courses “given at several different universities in the same city at roughly the same time” each term “in an age when every student can download a lecture on to a tablet or smartphone.”

This would mean cutting the number of higher education institutions by “at least one-third if not one-half,” with the destruction of thousands of courses and jobs.

Floud called for central government to act because “experience suggests that universities will not make such radical changes for themselves, [while] the Higher

Education Funding Council [for England] has remained supine in the face of the evidence that all this is unnecessary and inefficient.”

He also called for major research-oriented universities to scrap undergraduate teaching to focus instead on postgraduate students. This would mean cutting 6,000 places at Oxford and Cambridge alone. He called for academics to spend less time teaching, shifting the role to postgraduates, which would reduce teaching quality.

Floud's report nevertheless highlights some of the major problems facing universities, including being starved of state funding and forced to rely on fundraising schemes. “We now have the bizarre spectacle of [the government] setting universities a target of raising £2 billion a year to substitute for cuts in public funding. That would mean having more fundraisers than academic staff in architecture and planning or in agriculture and veterinary science. This is sheer madness,” he said.

He paints a stark picture of the creeping commercialisation of the education system. “Vice-chancellors are now expected to be supplicants for gifts rather than academic leaders or university managers.

“They are trying to be conference organisers, caterers, sporting promoters, careers advisers, pastoral counsellors; they run great estates, research institutes, theatres and concert halls; sell souvenirs and T-shirts, act as property developers and invest on the stock market.

“They set up overseas subsidiaries, finance start-up companies, develop science parks, maintain some of the most beautiful buildings in Britain, run some of our greatest museums, art galleries and libraries. They even run buses.”

Universities increasingly rely on private philanthropists, such as scholarships provided by wealthy alumni. “It is adding insult to injury to tell us

that the state will not support [universities] and that we should spend our time going cap in hand to hedge fund millionaires to fund such vital public services,” he writes.

Universities have suffered massive spending cuts in recent years, greater than the extra income from the tuition fee increase of 2010. The UK spends less on its higher education system than any other developed nation except Japan. For university workers, real wages have been slashed by 13 percent over the past five years.

University bosses are responding to the financial crisis by calling for increased tuition fees. In response, however, Floud called for the cap on tuition fees to be raised above the current £9,000 level. “Instead of fundraising, universities should be allowed to charge a fair price for the services they provide,” he says.

The vice-chancellor of Liverpool University, Sir Howard Newby, recently urged the removal of the cap. This will erect a further barrier to working class youth studying for a degree.

The higher education system is being hollowed out as part a broader privatisation agenda. Alongside sky-high fees, this has seen a rapid proliferation of private universities. Hundreds of private institutions are now able to adopt the prestigious “university” title, award official degrees and issue state-backed student loans.

These trends will only accelerate following the appointment of Greg Clark as the Minister for Universities in the recent cabinet reshuffle. Clark, a former advisor to big business working for Boston Consulting Group, has been trusted with several responsible posts by the Conservative Party and says he wants to “build on the work of the brilliant David Willetts,” his predecessor who tripled tuition fees to £9,000 per year.

Calls for a trimmed-down education system are entirely in line with the profit interests of finance capital. Their pro-business demands were put forward by the *Economist* in a leading article entitled “Creative Destruction,” which looked forward to the future of the privatised “education industry.”

The journal complains that “the business has changed little since Aristotle taught at the Athenian Lyceum: young students still gather at an appointed time and place to listen to the wisdom of scholars.

“Now a revolution has begun, thanks to three forces:

rising costs, changing demand and disruptive technology. The result will be the reinvention of the university.”

Using the budget crisis as a pretext, the *Economist* calls for a reduction in face-to-face teaching in favour of online courses. The resulting concentration of provision would entail the wholesale decimation of jobs, wages and conditions for teaching staff and the closure of all but the dominant international universities.

“Were the market for higher education to perform in future as that for newspapers has done over the past decade or two, universities’ revenues would fall by more than half, employment in the industry would drop by nearly 30 percent and more than 700 institutions would shut their doors. The rest would need to reinvent themselves to survive,” commented the *Economist*.

Online courses would also “reinforce inequality” as “superstar lecturers will earn a fortune, to the fury of their less charismatic colleagues.”

Education and research would fall victim to market forces. Less “marketable” courses, such as humanities, would suffer further cutbacks, while subjects demanded by corporations, such as business and sciences, would increase in availability.

Teaching quality would be reduced, with less interaction with academics and fellow students. Those who fall behind in their studies would be more likely to drop out.



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