

In the aftermath of the vote to lift the cap on HE fees

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The vote to treble HE fees in England last Thursday (9th Dec 2010) came after weeks of student organizing to resist the catastrophic changes we are facing in universities and the public sector as a whole. The fact that the vote was closer than it could have been and that there were a couple of resignations from the Lib Dem side will at least confirm for this emerging student movement that resistance is not futile, though it will also confirm that reason has little impact on right-wing ideology in full swing. Arguments about the importance of graduates for society as a whole (we expect our lawyers, doctors, social workers and teachers to be competent do we not?) have had little impact. The reasonable queries about why this government is reducing its funding of HE while other crisis-hit Western countries are not, or about the importance of holding on to one of the few areas of English public or professional life with an international reputation, have cut no ice at all.

For those of us working in Higher

Education as well as hoping to get some, the full range of proposed cuts make up a devastating package. Increased access to HE in England under the last government was made without concomitant infrastructural, teaching or research support and along with increased bureaucratization and pressure to perform in market terms. To now face the removal of teaching budgets for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and charge students the balance is not only unethical, it cannot work. Students will either stay away in droves or, where they do pay the inflated price, will no doubt expect some kind of additional value for money from a system already straining under the weight of casualisation, increased targets and aggressive managerialism. They will be expecting more than a reasonable education in a hierarchised national context cracking under its own inequalities of pay, security and opportunity and are, frankly, very unlikely to get it.

Gender, class and race inequali-

ties already dog the HE sector in England. Despite legislation prohibiting gender and race discrimination and requiring public institutions show further what measures they have taken to ensure increased equality, women continue to earn anywhere between 6% and 30% less than men in academia. The figure gets higher the higher up the promotion ladder you go, indicating that there are real glass ceilings as well as inequality within each level. There is no will to transform these inequalities because of course the top end depends on them. The franchising out of cleaning and security to the private sector means a lack of living wage right at the heart of our institutions. And academic pensions are about to be changed to an average salary exit scheme rather than a final salary one, multiplying the wage gap by as many years as women and minorities have worked.

The current difficulties HE institutions are facing in England mean that for the resistance we have seen not to calcify into divisions between students as consumers and faculty as service providers (in universities that survive of course), the links to broader inequalities must continue to be made. As one of the faculty involved in the occupation teach-ins in the last fortnight, I have been enormously heartened by the students' abilities to make the broader connections between cuts in HE and other cuts and existing equalities. The ongoing arguments about HE

funding and who should pay must avoid discourses of 'entitlement' at all costs. Because the problems we are facing are much deeper than a question of *reduced access to privileges* the majority of English young people have never had. They herald the disenfranchisement of a generation (or more) who will either be saddled with debts that reduce their subsequent choices or who will not take that risk. They signal the beginning of cuts to the public sector that will result in widespread unemployment or low pay that mean additional debt will not be an option for low- or average-earning families (who might otherwise help with HE costs).

We are told graduates will enter the labour market at the highest levels, earning on average above average salaries. Setting aside the question of whether later high pay is in fact an acceptable reason for graduates (rather than anyone else earning high salaries) to pay back twice, we also need to ask critical questions about what these statistical averages mask as well as what they reveal. What is the range that this average represents? What kinds of inequalities does it mask? Let's cite some different statistics:

- Women's lifelong earnings in the UK are on average 16.4% less than men's.
- Two-thirds of public sector workers are women, with women accounting for 73%

of the local government workforce and 77% of the NHS workforce.

- 40% of ethnic minority women live in poverty in the UK and this figure is likely to rise as unemployment increases.
- Women's pensions are on average 60% less than men's because they live longer than men and because of likely gaps in pension contributions.
- The annual deficit is £70bn and £120bn of tax goes uncollected, avoided or evaded each year.¹

Since women are over-represented in part-time and hourly paid jobs they will face a higher likelihood of being sacked as a result of public sector cuts. In this context we might ask then who can afford to pay back 27,000 after their education (and that's just in fees) and who will either face 30 years of debt (and possibly their children's debt too) and who will be able to pay this amount back within the first couple of years of working? Who will even think to take this risk with their future, and for whom is this amount of money no risk at all?²

It is important that we keep on pointing out – as the students have been doing really effectively – that these kinds of inequalities are not superficial, and they are not an unfortunate remnant of a more unequal age that will be addressed by the market over time. They are

the condition for the cuts in welfare provision and the public sector, because without these inequalities there would be no one to pick up the pieces as state services are rolled back. Some more questions the answers to which are entirely rhetorical: Who bears the brunt of the rolling back of the welfare state and the decrease in provision? Who does the caring work when the state will not pay for it? Who will be at home already (working or otherwise) to do it? Who will continue to make ends meet and expect their girls to help them? Women are already the ones who absorb the shocks of poverty, and the cuts mean that women will continue to be disproportionately affected.

These gendered aspects of the attack on the public sector are certainly not lost on the coalition government. They have already made it clear that their cutting agenda includes normative gendered assumption based on 'family values' that assume a middle-class heterosexual family unit where the woman can stay at home. Who is this true for? Increasingly in terms of the cuts we see that equality agendas are positioned on the side of 'not doing one's bit', of an old-style agenda incompatible with the need for people to tighten their belts. If this seems a bit of an extreme argument, consider the fact that when last year a landmark case was won against Birmingham Council for paying women less than men, the council response

was that they couldn't afford equal pay. Small business discourse similarly claims equality is a route to bankruptcy. The fact that equal pay is not bad for business turns out to be beside the point as equality is established as the opposite of good citizenship. Perhaps it will not be long before we hear politicians wondering whether it is sensible to educate girls at all, given that family survival depends on their willingness to do unpaid labour. More and more, equality agendas are seen as an unaffordable, utopian luxury that the market cannot support, and yet we are still being asked to believe in 'the market' as neutral.

So how do we move from these comments and the disappointments of Thursday's vote to raise the cap on fees, to feeling able to prepare ourselves for sustained resistance to the oncoming onslaught on the public sector and future cuts in HE. It's perhaps too early and too hard. But I do keep going back to the student occupations and the emergence of a contemporary student movement prepared to make the links, take on the establishment and learn impressively quickly on its feet. This and the issue of gender return me to ontological as well as political questions. We must ask ourselves perhaps not only what kind of generation of young people we want to see coming through universities, but also be prepared to challenge the gendered premises of the spending cuts whenever and wherever we

can. In pedagogical terms we might want to ask our students (if we have any) what kind of gendered subjects they want to become as well as what futures they want to look forward to. There are hard questions to be asked about why women continue to do more caring and domestic labour in England while claiming they are equal that cannot be answered in economic terms alone. Yet the questions of gendered subjectivity have to be asked in part because of their central political and economic salience.

NB This article was first published in *Feminist Review* (December 2010). Available online at: http://www.palgrave-journals.com/fr/collective_interventions.html

Endnotes

¹ Statistics and some of the above points are taken from the Women Against Cuts (<http://womenagainstthecuts.wordpress.com/>), Fawcett Society (<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>) and the Women's Budget Group (<http://www.wbg.org.uk/>) information.

² The Fawcett Society have tried to take the government to court for not consulting properly on the gendered impact of their proposed cuts. On Monday 6th December a 'permission hearing' was held to determine whether to grant a review will take place, supported by Equalities and Human Rights Commission. Unfortunately the Royal Court ruled that the government has no case to answer.