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Professor Howard Hotson criticizes the British government reforms of higher education. He is a co-author of manifesto [In Defence of Public Higher Education](#) which was published by Charles University in [czech translation](#). Professor Hotson visited Prague in November and now you can read an interview with him



Prof. Hotson, the UK higher education system is considered as one of the most successful systems in the world. Your universities are successful in global rankings as well as make real contribution to the society and regional development - and still the government decided to perform the reforms. What was behind this decision?

Well, that is the central question which we intend to raise with the government. One can read the two documents foundational to these reforms – the [Browne Review](#) of 2010) and the higher education [White Paper](#) of 2011 – without ever encountering either a sustained argument or any substantial body of empirical evidence explaining why it is that the UK university system requires radical reform. All one finds is an argument grounded in the unsubstantiated assumption that markets are the most efficient ways of distributing scarce resources and therefore that marketising the university system will make it more efficient.

So, the intention of the reform was not to correct something wrong but to make the system of higher education even more efficient...

That is right.

Another way to look at the situation is to go back to the original, official brief given to the Browne Review: its task was 'to examine the balance of payments between students, graduates, taxpayers, and employers'. The OECD's annual publication [Education at a Glance](#) provides a wonderfully comprehensive range of international comparative statistics which could and should have been used to examine this balance on an international, comparative, and above all empirical basis.

But that was not the case of the Browne Review?

That's correct. At no point in the Browne Review did they actually fulfill the task they had been given by the government, and it is not difficult to see why. If they actually had looked at the readily available data, they would have discovered: a) that the British university system was actually seriously underfunded in comparison with most of its international competitors and b) that public spending on higher education was much lower in the UK than in most other developed economies. They also would have discovered that private businesses were not contributing their fair share to the UK

knowledge economy. And they would have seen that the financial burdens placed on the students even prior of these reforms were far heavier than in all but one or two countries in the world. So if the Browne Review had fulfilled the instructions and examined 'the balance of payments between students, graduates, taxpayers, and employers', it could not have concluded that shifting still more of the financial burdens to students and graduates was fair and justified. Now, of course there are financial problems in the UK, as in the most other countries. We ran up a large deficit; we then used an enormous amount of public money to bail out the banks; the lengthy recession has cut tax revenues and increased unemployment expenditure; and consequently taxes needed to be raised or areas of public expenditure cut back. The key question is, who should pay for correcting this enormous mistake: the generation which made it, or the young people who will suffer from it? The government's solution was to withdraw 80% of the direct public support for undergraduate education and to treble tuition fees to an average of over ?8000 per year, by far the highest level of any 'public' university system in the world.

What many of us regard as most morally repugnant is the fact that the parliamentarians making this decision not only had all of their tuition fees paid by the taxpayer but also much of their university living expenses as well. When I arrived in the UK in the late 1980s, David Cameron (now Prime Minister and leader of the Conservatives) was studying in Oxford, Nick Clegg (now Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats) was studying in Cambridge, and Ed Miliband (now Leader of the Opposition and of the Labour Party), was the student president in my own Oxford college, protesting about the fact that student rents were going up. So these people had a virtually all-expenses-paid-ticket to university, funded by the taxpayer. They then walked out of university into the kind of jobs that young people today can only dream of; they bought the kind of houses today's young people can only dream of; they benefitted from the unsustainable financial boom of recent years; they paid inadequate levels of tax to fund public services; and they therefore share responsibility with the still older generation for driving up the budget deficit. It is the moral responsibility of the generations which caused this problem to solve it, but instead this generation of politicians is passing on the problem to the younger generation, who bears no responsibility for it and who will in any case need to cope with the enormous ecological problems which previous generations are also created for them. This is fundamentally unjust.

Nevertheless, the Browne Review was published and then the government started to draft the new law amendment. Students logically did not agree and large protests followed, the In Defense of Higher Education manifesto was written by leading UK university personalities, there were other actions done against the reform – but finally, despite massive public disagreement, the government succeeded. Could you find some key factors of the government success?

Well, the crucial tactical move the government made was to take the decisive parliamentary vote very, very early in the process. The Browne Review was published on 12 October 2010. The crucial parliamentary vote trebling tuition fees was taken less than two months later, on 9 December 2010. This was months before the publication of the White Paper on 28 June 2011 revealed the real nature of the government's proposed university reforms. As well as being rushed, the key vote was taken against the backdrop of deliberately exaggerated concerns about the stability of the British currency. The manufactured mood of the moment was that, if the UK government didn't start solving its budget deficit by transferring the funding burden to students, the UK would be preyed upon by the international currency markets and end up like Ireland or Portugal – a rather absurd supposition, give the tiny contribution of undergraduate education to the overall budget.

In any case, the new funding arrangement does not actually decrease the amount of money that the government has to borrow, in fact it increases it at least in the short term and possibly in the longer term as well. It just moves the public debt from the deficit ledger to a different ledger. Because some of this money is going to be paid back by graduates, it does not count towards the annual budget deficit. But since no one can accurately forecast how much of their tuition loans the average graduate will pay back during a lifetime of work, this huge speculative gamble simply transfers risk from current taxpayers to future taxpayers. In this respect too, this solution is selfish and irresponsible, solving the problems caused by the current generation by storing up more problems for the next generation.

There is another higher education system in the UK – the Scottish one. What was behind the decision of the Scottish government to pay the fees for students in Scotland? Did somehow Scottish higher education institutions contribute to this decision?

No, not to my knowledge, at least not directly. The essentially difference is a cultural one: Scottish society is more cohesive, and they have a far more deep-rooted sense that providing everyone with free access to higher education benefits the entire nation. But the really crucial point here is a deeper one. One of the implicit arguments which is always made – and these arguments are very rarely made explicit – is that there is no other alternative to trebling English tuition fees. There is an alternative, and it is the one practiced not only within the most prosperous European countries but also within the northern portion of the United Kingdom itself. Scotland has determined for the foreseeable future not only not to raise tuition fees but to eliminate them completely as the Liberal Democrats famously promised before they joined the Coalition government.

It is not the Scottish position but the new English one which is radically unprecedented. I mean, no country has ever done what the English have just done: eliminated almost all direct public funding of undergraduate teaching overnight, effectively abolishing their public university system at the stroke of a pen. Even the Americans have a public university system, and three quarters of American students study in that public university system. England is the only developed country on the face of Earth which has effectively abolished its public university system. And I think you only abolish your public university system when your country has become so fragmented – ethnically, socially, and economically – that people no longer regard themselves as belonging to some kind of cohesive community.

Do you think that is the case of the United Kingdom?

This is what the government is tacitly assuming, but it remains to be seen whether they are correct. In fact, there is no evidence that the English actually want their public university system to be abolished and the government knows this. A series of polls have shown that the majority of people want the majority of undergraduate teaching expenses to be paid from public sources, as they were until this academic year. The Browne Review committee conducted another survey on this same subject which confirmed that the majority of people of all social backgrounds wanted the government to continue to cover half or more of higher education expenses. But the Browne Review committee suppressed the result of their only piece of fresh research from the final report because it undermined their preferred funding solution, and these results were only revealed by a freedom-of-information request after the report was published.

The two main UK politic parties – both the Conservative and Labour – know that their proposals are highly controversial and did everything possible to avoid putting them before the British people. They deliberately commissioned the Browne Report before the 2010 election so that it would report after the election, since this allowed them to remove any reference to radical higher education reform from their election manifestoes. Now, why would they want to do that? Because they knew that proposing to radically overhaul the UK university system would not be popular with voters. Candidates from the third party, the Liberal Democrats, signed pledges to abolish university tuition fees altogether, even though they had doubts that such a pledge was affordable. Why? Because they knew that such a promise would be popular with voters. Since then, in the spring of 2012, the government withdrew its planned higher education bill from parliament because they knew it would encounter popular opposition. So, the evidence suggests that what has just been done to the English university system is not what the British people want. The question therefore is: why they are doing it anyway? And this is partly where this lobbying comes in. The Minister for Universities has spent much more time talking with the lobbyists from the private for-profit university sector than he has for instance with the students that he is supposedly putting at the heart of the new university system. This is the dimension of the problem I tried to outline in my lecture at the Academy of Sciences.

We are facing higher education reforms as well. There were large protests in the spring of this year and the reform was very much like other reforms – pushing more corporate-like governance, introducing tuition fees, changing the role of external bodies within the universities. We also had a White Paper without solid evidence and with manipulative surveys. However, the protests were successful and the reform was at least temporarily withdrawn. We believe that one of the key success factors was strong involvement of the academic self-governance in the protests. Do you see any relationship between the university governance and the public character of higher education?

Changes to university governance are needed in order to subserviate universities to the government and thereby to business. In order to transform universities from genuinely autonomous and independent entities governed by academic values into instruments for delivering government economic policy, governed by the purely monetary values of the marketplace, you need two things. The first is docile university rectors, trained in business administration rather than academic subjects and responsive to instructions from government. The second is rigid and authoritarian hierarchical line management systems. Both of those have been introduced in virtually every UK university aside from Oxford and Cambridge.

These rigid line management systems are appropriate to manufacturing industry; they are not the way in which creative industries or Silicon Valley work; and they are not appropriate to universities. Their impact on morale is catastrophic: when collegial decision-making is replaced with instructions from senior university management, a sense of personal engagement in teaching and research disappears with all kinds of counterproductive results. In many even of the best UK universities now it is the disciplinary offence to critically discuss your own experience of authoritarian and hierarchical university management in public, because by doing so you are bringing your university into disrepute. So instead of being a haven of free expression, the university is becoming a place where you cannot even reflect publicly on your own personal experience without facing disciplinary measures.

Is there any alternative to this line management governance?

There are two universities in the UK which are not managed in this way, and they are generally regarded as the best: Oxford and Cambridge. Within the past decade, attempts were made to impose corporate-style government on these two ancient universities as well, but because sovereign authority was ultimately vested in the university senates, these attempts were defeated. As a consequence, there is nobody in Oxford who can tell you what to do and yet everything is conducted in a collegial way because everyone recognizes that they have to share responsibility for the good of their college, for the good of their students, for the good of their faculty. This collegial and democratic form of governance makes radical changes of policy extremely difficult, and managers therefore regard it as ineffective, inefficient, anarchic and in need of 'modernization'. But in financial terms it is actually extremely cost-effective precisely because it is attractive to academics. Oxford and Cambridge attract some of the best academics in the country and manage to retain them even though they are worked extremely hard and relatively poorly paid. The reason is because, once you have worked in a collegial university which has preserved academic freedom and is governed by genuinely academic values, it is almost inconceivable to surrender that freedom and collegiality and become a part of an autocratic, corporate machine in order to make a bit more money doing a bit less work. To do so is to surrender what is most important, which is a sense of autonomy, a sense of independence and interdependence within this collegial society. And this is a lesson which the government has overlooked completely. The astonishing thing is that we have a completely different model of how university should work staring us in the face, right in the middle of the UK university system, indeed at the very apex of the UK university system, in the most famous and successful universities in the country. This model is still viable

and it is still the best way to do things. And yet the people managing the English university system are so blinded by management school dogma that they prefer not to see it.

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