

## A worried parent writes

*Stefan Stern*

“Plumbing college.” This was my wife’s not entirely satirical answer to the question about where she hoped our children might end up studying. Plumbing college clearly has a lot to recommend it. You learn useful and relevant skills there. You become eminently employable. And you probably don’t find yourself having £30,000 of tuition fees to pay back when you finally complete the course.

But all this talk of fees and employability takes us down an avenue I would prefer the debate on higher education could avoid, at least in the first instance. This anxious parent was an undergraduate in the 1980s, a time when certain truths about student life remained self-evident, in spite of the serious economic transformation the UK was going through at the time.

A humanities student in the 1980s, pursuing a non-vocational course, could still feel confident that the degree he or she was studying was worthwhile in itself. University was supposed to be about a broadening and deepening of the individual. The clue was in the name: one hoped to leave having developed a richer understanding of the universe and one’s own place in it.

Over the last three decades this notion of higher education as an unquestioned good has begun to slip. It wasn’t just Margaret Thatcher but also a Labour Secretary of State for education – a *Labour* Secretary of State – who ruminated out loud on the usefulness of studying medieval history.<sup>1</sup> During this period the fashionable concept of employability became accepted as a key goal – perhaps the key goal – of education. I don’t think I am imagining having once heard the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair (a graduate of St. John’s College, Oxford), declare, apparently without irony, that;

*“The more you learn the more you earn.”*

But should I now suppress what some might consider to be self-indulgent instincts? Must higher education be seen primarily as a sensible and pragmatic down-payment towards the creation of future earning potential? What advice should the conscientious parent give to his or her children as far as higher education is concerned?

The question of cash cannot be avoided. The great and necessary expansion of university places had to be paid for somehow. Tuition fees – a kind of delayed graduate

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian (2003) ‘Clarke dismisses medieval historians’ [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/may/09/highereducation.politics](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/may/09/highereducation.politics)

tax – are here to stay, in one form or another. And once the political row and outrage (real and synthetic) have died down, all of us will have to think calmly about how we will help our children cope with the burden of debt they will inevitably incur.

Not unlike the original student loans which came in to replace grants, borrowing to pay back the cost of tuition fees over time will probably turn out to be one of the best and most affordable loans any young person ever takes out. The parents of future students will have to assume the role of financial educators, explaining and reassuring that these debts will prove manageable and will be paid off, in time. It may well also be the case, however, that with the growing downward mobility of much of the ‘squeezed middle’ in this country, parental (financial) help of the kind I and many others enjoyed as recently as 20-odd years ago will become a much rarer phenomenon.

And that realisation drags me back to a more defiant and uncompromising thought about higher education. Forget future earning potential. Three or more years at university, however they are financed, are an immense privilege. This is not a time to waste, frankly, pursuing a subject or discipline you have no interest in purely because you have an idea that great riches may lie at the other end of that degree. Future doctors must study medicine and future geologists must study geology – that is clear. But what I shall tell my children in due course is that university is there for them to deepen their love of a subject and to develop as individuals. Job prospects, employability skills and building networks of ‘contacts’, must be a secondary or even tertiary concern. Study something that fascinates you, and worry about the future later on.

Irresponsible advice? I hope not. Education for education’s sake? Why not? Medieval history must be endlessly stimulating, and not nearly as useless as the former Secretary of State suggested. Classicists would be able to tell us that Aristotle’s concept of ‘flourishing’ as an individual – *eudaimonia* – does not imply great material success at all. Living and doing well is what matters. One probably needs to be well educated to achieve this, but not necessarily paid an investment banker’s salary (or bonus).

Perhaps I will be condemning my children to decades of penury and miserable rented accommodation – or guaranteeing that they never leave home. But if some school teachers are too nervous to speak up for education as a good thing in itself, and academics are too scared or too busy, then someone will have to. It may as well be the parents who take on this lonely but important task. To graduate in the university of life – I mean as a human being, and not merely as an employee or consumer – it may be necessary to do some serious study at a real university first.

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