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Attacks on Higher Education

Anarchist Affinity

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The current Liberal government's changes to higher education reflect a neoliberal agenda, in that they are attempting to change the entire way that higher education is thought of and organised in a 'prosperous' society like Australia. They are positing a series of radical right-wing reforms that aim to create a market of universities, this will create a class divide, largely excluding the working class.

To put it simplistically, the previous model worked in the way that once a previous student earned enough, they could pay back their loans and pay tax which would pay for the next generation, then that generation would pay for the next through their taxes and then it would be paid back, and so on. While this system still involved debt and an assumption that all people who have a degree will earn more, it was superior to what is suggested through the new system. This new system will create an even worse debt burden for students.

However, it is not impossible for education to be free under capitalism. It should be an expectation that the government make higher education free. There are any number of fields where excessive government spending are prevalent; the military budget is an example. Or the excessive funding of the

Australian Ballet School. The next obvious answer is tax on the ruling class and corporations. The suggested new, de-regulated system assumes that people attend university purely to earn more money in their careers. This neoliberal conception of the individual pursuit of education is at odds with reality, as people attend university for various reasons. It also ignores all the manifold forms of oppression that affect outcomes for students, placing all blame, and pressure around failing or succeeding upon the individual.

If it is assumed that students only study to earn more, degrees that lead to higher earning potential will be prioritised and those which do not will decrease in quality or be cut altogether. We have already seen the kind of choices made by universities with this in mind, what has been devalued, defunded and threatened to be cut has been units such as gender studies and indigenous studies. This is not a coincidence. It is obvious that the system this government is working towards is one where all universities are private companies with no funding from the government that compete with each other in a market system. De-regulation of fees is just the thin edge of the wedge. Supporters of this have, and will, continue to argue that this will bring prices down, however, the reality is that our university system will divide along class lines. Currently Australian universities are of a high standard in world terms, once deregulated, there will be a divide between “good” universities and “cheap” universities. The quality of education will decrease at these “cheap” universities, yet the quality will not necessarily increase at the “good” universities. This is where the class divide will exist.

As we have seen in recent years, all universities will cut costs by mistreating staff; they will further casualise positions, keep wages at a minimum and attack working conditions. This divide between “good”, expensive universities and their “cheap” counterparts will create a further class divide where only the rich will be able to afford the “good” education. In contrast,

the social mobility of those from low and middle-income families will continue to be wrecked. The most alarming part of this plan for higher education is CSP places for private institutions, it is clear that this government want to make private and currently public universities part of the same market. This is more than likely to create what they call in the UK “cashpoint” colleges, rather than improving the quality of education for the most people. These “cashpoint” colleges take public money and abuse the loan system in place to use students like ATMs; the result being empty classrooms in some universities and overcrowded ones in others. As once students have taken out loans to attend university it is only in the university’s interest to keep them so long as they are getting fees: there is little incentive for students close to burning out to continue. Thus, these institutions value courses that will make money over providing a quality, well-rounded education. The current model that is being pursued by the Liberal party, is to take us as far down the market route as the American university education system. We do not want neoliberal education in Australia. We are all well aware from the American system, the cost of higher education in America stops people from attending a quality university, or going to university at all.

We reject that this is the best model, that Pyne idealises as the best model for Australian higher education. At the moment, according to analysis by the National Tertiary Education Union, a medicine degree costs the ridiculous sum of \$60,000, however with deregulation and interest rates, it could cost up to \$200,000. It is hard to work exactly how much a degree will cost as it will be up to the discretion of each university, but it guaranteed to be to the detriment of university students and staff.

This new model will reinforce the growing disparity between Group of Eight universities, and other tertiary institutions. Universities such as those in the Go8 can more readily capitalise on a prestigious reputation and will outpace other

universities in a price gap, narrowing the options low-income students have as prices diverge. This, in turn, will cause inequality between universities, not only in what is available to students, but also in funding to these universities – universities with higher fees will be better funded, however, better resources cannot be promised, as universities will consider themselves more of a company, therefore their concern will be in profit not education quality.

There is also a less publicised aspect on the issue of privatising education in Australia, that is how women will be affected with these changes. Due to the socialisation of gender in relation to work, women currently dominate total enrolments in the humanities compared to other degrees such as engineering and the sciences. As outlined above, the systemic undermining of less profitable degrees such as the humanities will lead to the disproportionate decrease in women who attend university. Plus, as total debt increases with time, this will negatively affect women, who are more likely to take time off work due to family commitments (also due to socialisation), which will increase the amount and amount of time to pay off their debts.

The move to this explicitly neoliberal mode of tertiary education may fall under the radar of many Australians: this is because changes to student loans are expected, going by international trends, the main concern is the privatisation of education. We can see that there is an underlying agenda to move to a model which exacerbates unequal opportunities for a broad range of students, particularly those who come from low income, rural, indigenous backgrounds and international students (who are already treated as “cashpoints” and forced to live in poverty). Education needs to be preserved as an opportunity for all. Education should be free for all.