

The marketisation of our universities

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Stop the Marketisation of our Universities

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Luke Martell

The occupation against [Sussex University outsourcing](#) is in its fifth week and the story of [higher education privatisation](#) continues to unfold.

As English universities have become more marketised their advertising budget has risen. [Spend on marketing](#) rose by 22% in the run-up to £9k fees and will spiral. In the meantime courses of academic and social importance deemed [insufficiently profitable](#) are being [closed](#). Private HE provider BPP has been reprimanded for [false advertising](#). That's what happens when profit comes first. Claims that the marketisation of universities has not hit working class applications are based on [flawed postcode data](#).

The government are changing regulations to open the way for [private companies to call themselves universities](#) and deliver courses [for profit](#). They're [altering tax exemptions](#) to let privateers make money out of college services. [Governance structures](#) in universities are reformed to increase managerial control and facilitate the corporatisation of HE.

Hauling in more fee-paying punters means more residences and teaching facilities. To make space for this, local communities [get torn up](#) and [rerooted](#) against their wishes. At UCL, attracting the corporate sector and £9k students requires [changing the use of buildings](#). So seminar rooms and museums get turned over to Starbucks, the change dressed up by calling the space a 'student hub'. To make room for mall-style avenues staff get shared spaces, rather than rooms where students can talk to them in private. Management-speak describes the shift as being from 'cell-like' spaces to 'den-like' spaces. Buildings become more about [attracting customers](#) than their functionality for existing students and staff.

At [Sheffield Uni](#) and the [University of London](#) pay and conditions at the bottom have been hit by outsourcing. The [Working Lives Institute](#) and [Social Enterprise UK](#) have raised huge doubts over outsourcing in universities and more generally. The US Senate has been searing in its critique of [for-profit HE in the USA](#). Marketing is misleading and inflated, as are executive salaries and student fees. The [US for-profits](#) soak up taxpayer subsidies and have high drop-out rates. In the heyday of [UK FE sub-contracting](#) the Serious Fraud Office got called in.

[Higher Education privatisation](#) is on the increase. [UCLan](#) and [Falmouth](#) are under threat. The [College of Law](#) has been bought by a private equity firm. BPP and Pearson Education are muscling in to offer courses for profit. Pearson have managed to get the IPPR think-tank to [promote their case](#). The New College of Humanities charges £18k a year, to those who can afford it. The Vice-Chancellor of Salford University has [expressed his alarm](#) as have other [establishment figures](#). Even the VC of the UK's first private university is [arguing against for-profit](#) higher education.

The introduction of open access to academic publications sounds positive. Yet the [gold route](#) proposed for the UK means that universities will pay for publication, increasing managerial control of what gets published, at the expense of academic autonomy. Academics who are temporary or unemployed won't get this support. For-profit

universities without libraries will gain access to publications for free, with public universities footing the bill. They will pass the cost on in higher fees, so students pay for the furthering of bureaucratic control and commercial interests.

The campaign to save public education for the social good against privatisation for profit has taken some interesting turns. Lumbering unions were outwitted in 2010's anti-austerity politics by students, and again now by their battle against privatisation. Opposition has become direct: occupation of profit-making spaces, careful not to disrupt education and students. Left-sectarianism has been evident by its [absence](#), and bottom-up inclusivity the name of the game. The literature by protestors [documenting their case](#) has been [impressive](#) and [articulate](#).

The [Sussex Uni protest](#) has captured a national and international mood amongst those appalled by the commercialisation of the social fabric of society. Household names in the world of popular culture have been to the seaside to support the occupation and [academics](#) and [political figures](#) have [put their names](#) down in support.

It doesn't have to be this way. Something is happening to tuition fees in [Germany](#). What's supposedly economically necessary has taken a distinctly political route. Centre-right regions have introduced fees. Red/green states have not. Or they've rescinded them on taking over from the right. Popular plebiscites in remaining right-wing heartlands have rejected student contributions. Germany is about to abolish them across the board. The marketisation of universities isn't inevitable. There's an alternative. The UK should take a look.