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Common Error No. 48 [1]

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48. "A university or college education is a public good that society should pay for."

There's truth in the first part of this. Most of us prefer a society with educated people in it, and benefit from it. Educated people can provide services for us, and create the jobs and wealth for the future. They often also add a certain civility which enhances the lives of others.

But they already have access to the rewards of their own education. The main beneficiary of education is the recipient, directly and in measurable ways. The university or college graduate has access to a greater range of fulfilling career opportunities, and has access to much better paying jobs than their uneducated or untrained counterpart. Those who pay towards their education make one of life's very best investments ? it repays them many times over in money as well as opportunity.

Someone has to pay for tertiary education. Lecturers have to be paid, buildings and facilities maintained. If this is paid out of taxation, it means that taxpayers in general pay for it, rather than just the beneficiaries of it. It means that the person who leaves school to become a casual labourer is paying higher taxes so that someone who is already better intellectually endowed will have access to better jobs and a higher income for life.

UK university education used to be "free". No tuition was charged and students were given a living allowance to support them. It was a luxury product that could only be given to one in twenty of the age group. Now students have to support themselves with the help of loans, and contribute to the costs of their education. It is much less of a luxury, and one that nearly half the age group can have access to. Education is indeed a good, and should be as widely available as possible.

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