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The US university alternative [1]

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This Saturday is USA College Day [3], when over 100 US institutions hold an open day to recruit UK students. Held at Kensington Town Hall from 11 am to 4 pm, the event will feature stalls from 127 US universities, including top Ivy League ones.

The Telegraph reports [4] a record demand from UK students. "In some cases," they report, "students are being tempted by generous bursaries and scholarships worth more than £20,000 that are not available in this country."

There may be several factors behind this rising demand, but two reasons stand out. UK higher education is inadequately and inappropriately financed. A huge increase in students wanting places has not been matched by a corresponding increase in the places available, leaving a record number of students, perhaps 180,000, failing to gain admission.

A second reason might arise from the discrimination practiced by some universities in favour of students from disadvantaged backgrounds with poorer A-level passes. Some students with As and even A*s who attended good schools have been rejected in favour of those from poorer schools with a few Bs among their scores. Rather than settle for universities they regard as second best, many of those denied admission to top UK universities have looked to illustrious US institutions instead.

It is obviously a good thing that access to US institutions gives the chance of a university education to more UK students, and gives talented students more chances of gaining a prestigious degree. It provides yet more evidence that the US model of university education featuring a mixture of state and private institutions seems to do a better job than the almost entirely public sector UK model.

There is an overwhelming case for turning UK universities into free-standing independent institutions no longer under state control, and of reforming the finance of higher education to make this possible. This is unlikely to please egalitarians who want universities to be instruments of social engineering, and it cannot be long before some of them come up with an alternative solution: that of making it illegal to study abroad.

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