Universities, Willetts and Oakeshott [1]

Written by Philip Salter [2] | Wednesday 11 August 2010

News just in. The UK may not have enough clothes to meet the growing demand among the populace. According to the department for jumble sales, there won?t be enough clothes available for those unable to match up people with suitable attire. This comes on the back of the news that shops are going to cut the number of clothes in their stores despite the growing demand.

Could this happen? Only if the government regulated clothes as it currently regulates universities. Given the inherent problems that a central agency faces in trying to coordinate any industry, the fact that we don?t have enough university places [3] to meet demand should be of little surprise. That universities are actively cutting places in the face of rising demand shows how far the price mechanism has been perverted.

But the problems in higher education run deeper than the government?s subversion of the price and information. In his lifetime, Michael Oakeshott was concerned? although never overly pessimistic? about the decline of the institution of the university. If he were alive today I suspect he would be even more troubled by the last twenty years. Independence has been undermined to the point where universities have become? in Oakeshott?s terms? ?enterprise associations' rather than ?civil associations?. In other words, universities have been usurped by the state to bring about specific political ends. The fact that power to control universities still resides in BIS is instructive. They are seen as a government agency for delivering skills to businesses, social mobility and economic growth.

Our universities are in a serious mess. David Willetts? who gave the <u>LSE 2008 Michael Oakeshott</u> memorial lecture [4]? surely knows what needs to be done. Now it is time he did it.

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- [1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/universities-willetts-and-oakeshott
- [2] http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5787
- [3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-10913471
- [4] http://www2.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2008/20071128t1633z001.aspx
- [5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
- [6] http://disqus.com