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Why students benefit from fees [1]

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The universities are very keen indeed to extract the maximum £9,000 a year fees from their students. Indeed, half of them have already said (to the government's initial shock) that they would indeed charge this maximum figure. But the universities may get something they weren't bargaining for in return. Namely, much more discerning customers.

To a student in particular, £9,000 a year is a lot of cash. If they are spending that sort of money, they will be asking some pretty sharp questions about teaching standards, course quality, and their job prospects after they get their degree. And the universities will have to have answers to those questions ? or see students drift away to other universities that have better answers. Universities will find that they can no longer drift along doing things as the academics and administrators deem fit. They will need to ditch that public-sector ethos and actually start doing this in the way that best suits their student customers.

For a time I taught at a small private college in the US, and I saw this first hand. There was fierce competition between colleges, so teachers were all expected to go out on a schools roadshow to show the college's wares to prospective students ? exactly the sort of thing which will come as a shock to British academics. If I was late marking an essay, the students would be banging on my door wanting to know why ? not as sheepish supplicants, but as rather irritated customers. If they didn't understand something, they figured it was more likely to be because I had not explained it well enough, rather than that they were too dim. And they wouldn't let me go home until I had explained it better, and they had properly understood it.

At last we are getting the same competitive pressures here. And about time. For as Adam Smith put it, "The discipline of the colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters."

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[4] http://disqus.com