



THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SCHOOLS BLOG

A head master writes...

Thoughts from the study of Andrew Halls, head master of King's College School, Wimbledon



Fall of leaf on Wimbledon Common, change of clocks, Keats's wonderful To Autumn introduced to my Year 9 English class...it must be the UCAS season again. This year, however, there is a sharper chill in the academic air. Any student who misses their offer next August will be hit with a massive financial penalty, perhaps as much as £18,000 - the potential additional cost of going to university from 2012. So grievous is the additional cost that some universities are writing to candidates who said they would like to take a gap year to ask them if after wish to reconsider, creating yet more pressure on the diminishing number of places available to English pupils.

Parents and school pupils are left asking a series of questions about the UK university system that leads to some amazing answers.

Is it true that EU students who win places at a Scottish university, will, like the Scots, pay no fee? Yes, certainly. Is this true for boys or girls from my school, or indeed any English school? Of course not! Are students applying to UK universities from outside the EU more attractive to these universities than British students whose families have paid taxes in this country for many years? Yes, of course - they cover their own costs,

whereas some leading universities calculate that each UK undergraduate costs them about £8,000 in subsidy. Is there a limit on the number of non-UK students universities can accept from the EU? No, not at all. But didn't Tony Blair say he wanted 50% of UK children to attend university? Yes, he did - but his figure was plucked from nowhere and was completely uncoded. In fact, real spending per student has halved in the last ten years, and this helps explain why so many British universities are so desperate for money that they are complicit in a fees policy that would have been unimaginable even three years ago. Never has an education policy been so unjoined up as we have seen in UK higher education in the last decade.

But although it is good to see the new government has thought the unthinkable, has it only produced the utterly unworkable? Are we really saying that young people who go to university should then be required to stay in debt for the next 30 years? That they must pay a more punitive rate of interest if they are ill-advised enough to do well in life and earn above the £41,000 threshold? That the threshold will only rise every five years, meaning that the graduate of 2020 may be paying "super interest" on a salary of only a little over £30,000 by today's standards. That they might be penalised if they try to pay off their debt early?

Even shabby double-glazing companies might hesitate before proposing such a scheme. But education is not a whim or a luxury. If a boy or girl at my school wishes to become a doctor or surgeon, they have no choice but to read Medicine somewhere. Should they really expect to stay in debt for most of their working lives, paying additional interest on a figure that could well exceed £70,000 for medics, when the qualification they have sought is vital to the community they serve?

Why should it all be like this? The only answer I can think of is - to pacify the Lib Dems. And that means the proposal, like any committee-born, compromise-shaped monster, will first horrify, then baffle, and finally become an object of ridicule before being put down with as much shameful dignity as its dim-witted progenitors can muster. And all that means that the real problem - the over-expansion and underfunding of British universities - will have to be solved all over again.

It looks like being a long winter in the groves of academe.