



A MODEST MEMBER

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So why not learn now, pay later?

Mavis is nagging me to find a subject about which I can make powerful and popular speeches with election day drawing nigh.

Fred says I should come out with a definite policy to kick the universities — to promise to cut off their money supply and so on. This is a tempting prospect as I know there would be many votes in it.

My people distrust the university louts they see on TV and they are always grizzling because they have to pay taxes to keep them.

I tell them that TV stations only show the bad students and they mustn't think that all are like that. This sounds convincing until you look at the "drop-out" rate, which stands at about 33 per cent.

This is about twice as high as in the UK. Why do we do so badly?

One of the reasons is that our universities expanded so quickly in the 1960s and too many poor quality staff had to be appointed and with which we are now lumbered.

Evidently university staff are a kind of sacred cow: if you sack them they bellow that they are being victimised because of their political beliefs or something.

Universities are always acutely conscious of their haloes, so evidently they either can't or won't sack the bad ones.

Fred says that this is either incompetence or cowardice. If the dean of a faculty doesn't know good staff from bad, he can't be much of a dean. If he does know, but can't sack the bad ones, then there is something wrong either with him or the system.

CSIRO can get rid of their failures, why can't universities? They would have a lot more public sympathy and we would have a better "drop-out" record.

Another reason for the poor performance is because the things you get for nothing you appreciate as such.

If a student had to pay the full cost of his tuition he would be more likely to appreciate his opportunity and would be less likely to embark on a course beyond his capabilities.

The total running costs of universities in 1970 came to about \$212 million and the fees paid by students came to \$27.4 million, or 13 per cent.

And of this amount, about \$11 million came from the Commonwealth scholarships and another considerable amount from State Government scholarships.

So it is clear that the average student pays directly from his own or his family's pocket a very small proportion of the cost of his university education. If he paid a larger share, we would get better results.

It has been estimated that the increased earning power of a graduate would enable him to pay 15 per cent interest on all the money invested in his university education.

Surely it would be possible to work out some loan scheme whereby the money to pay full fees would be advanced to the student, and the amount recovered from him later in annual instalments.

There would be problems, of course. Some graduates get paid more than others and also the costs vary between different faculties. But generally speaking, the earning power of graduates from expensive faculties, such as medicine, is higher also.

And what a difference it would make to the administration of universities. There would be a real inducement to cut costs as they would no longer have the feeling that if they grizzled long enough the Government would pick up the tab.

They would be encouraged to have a higher entrance standard, and to kick out the students who make learning difficult for others.

And from the students' point of view there would be less of a tendency for the student to gravitate to an easy faculty if he knew that he would have to pay the full cost later in life. I shouldn't think there would be quite so many doing Arts!

And it would stop the students thinking that a university education is his right. The opportunity would be his right, provided he was prepared to do the work and take the risk. This is a good principle.

I know there would be many problems in this scheme but the Swedes seem to be able to make it work. We could too if we had the will.

But if we can't, Fred wants me to sound a grim warning. He says he's getting sick of paying taxes for education in general and university education in particular.

He wouldn't mind so much if he thought this money was being well spent. But a "drop-out" rate of one-in-three doesn't seem good management to him.