

# This Year's Module

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Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson,  
The New Idea of a University,  
Haven Books, 2001  
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"Education is an important key...but the good life's never won by degrees..."—so sang Bryan Ferry in 1973, himself the holder of a Fine Art degree from the University of Newcastle.<sup>1</sup> This provocative theme of what may or may not be achieved by university graduates is one of the issues taken up in Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson's *The New Idea of the University*, a timely critique of the Labour Party's reinscription of the role, meaning and ideological framework of the British university. In chapters focusing upon "The Economic Case for Higher Education", "The Old Idea of the University", "The New University for Life", and "Levering Up Standards or Top-Down Drive", Maskell and Robinson systematically consider recent changes within higher education, providing what is clearly a polemic against what they see as the government's out-and-out attack on the universities and their long-held moral and intellectual place within British culture.

"The word 'university'", write Maskell and Robinson, "has a history which makes some things almost impossible to say, for example that the university should be for all, or for job-training, or to make us rich." (P. 65). Later in their book they observe:

"Scholars are traditionally poor; which is not ideal, but it is positively a bad thing for them to become fat cats, or to expect to be courted by company boards looking for rising entrepreneurs. The educated ought to have a reasonable chance of a comfortable life in the clerisy, but not to expect a direct link between a degree and the creation of wealth." (P. 183)

But that which it is "almost impossible to say" about the university has today become not merely "possible" but a new orthodoxy, one spouted at every turn, both by apologists for the transformation of the universities into profit-driven businesses, and for those who demand an allegedly democratic increase in student numbers, a matter linked to the widening of university access to those who have been excluded in the past. The university's substantial history as a place in which critical and individual thought has been encouraged and protected from the whims of the marketplace has been, as the authors of this book make clear, pulverised into invisibility, obscured by the smoke-screens of profit and mock democratic access for all. In the "New University" emphasis is placed for the most part upon the supposedly profitable, utilitarian features of taking up a degree course place. For the Labour Party and its supporters, suggest Maskell and Robinson, "...education is an investment. Education is the same as training; education is useful; education will make us rich." (P. 4)

Quite aside from their abhorrence at the way university managers and "the modern career academic" (p. 41) have taken to this new model of what it is that universities should be about, the authors of this book rightly attend to the absurdity of such claims, mapping out in their opening chapter just how pathetically untrue, and indeed just how scientifically unsound is the argument, proposed by government-sponsored economists, that "profitability" and a university education automatically correspond. "How can we know",

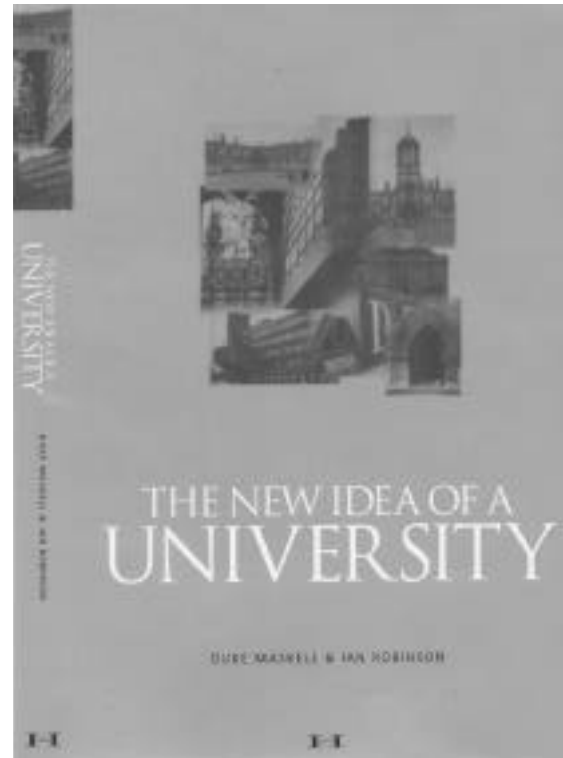
they ask, "whether education makes people more productive or not? We can't. We just don't know in any such way as economists understand knowledge. But we invest billions every year on the assumption that we can and do know, all the same." (P. 16)

Maskell and Robinson take issue with the very notion that the universities need to be expanded at all, irrespective of any arguments revolving around ideas of access for those who have been hitherto excluded:

"The entire state-subsidized expansion of higher education, maintained by so many governments over so many years, with no semblance of justification offered for it that isn't economic, has been, it seems, a tremendous error, economically. And if the subsidies were withdrawn, the grotesquely bloated system they have created would shrink back to something that made economic (and educational) sense. The so-called customers would be found simply not to exist and the so-called need for this so-called education would vanish with them. In its present shape and size the whole thing is simply a creation of wastefulness." (P. 13)

In the closing pages of the book it is suggested that what should in part replace university expansion is a return to some form of technical training, a reinstating of the polytechnics, funded in large measure by those businesses who would wish their future employees be "trained"—which is not to be confused with "educated"—in specific job-related skills and abilities. This distinction between education and training is markedly present throughout the volume. Maskell and Robinson do not sneer at the notion of employment-related training, rather they emphasise that education is a very different thing to the learning of skills necessary to the carrying out of specific technical tasks.

The question of the relationship between the university and truth surfaces at several points. Presenting the university as a place in which critical thought is to be assiduously encouraged, Maskell and Robinson emphasise that education should connect with life in general rather than just to one's career, and teaching should take place in a way that extends discussion well beyond the narrow confines of a given academic subject. They go so far as to state that "teaching" is in fact too problematic a term for this exchange, linking this word to the new situation in which students are expected to regurgitate, in exams or essays, particular facts transmitted in "courses" or "modules", a means of information transmission that can be easily policed by government examining boards. Citing at length the works of J. H. Newman and of Jane Austen, Maskell and Robinson propose that these writers' ideas on education offer an important, desirable model of how education should take place and of what it means to be educated, as opposed to trained. "Jane Austen", they point out, "consistently, systematically, presents the instructed mentality as the opposite of the educated, and the reception of instruction as one way of not being educated at all." (P. 39). Whilst citing such figures fits perfectly well with the general critical thrust of *The New Idea of the University*, Maskell and Robinson's respect for "English Literature" is sometimes a little too intense, as though close attention to this subject were the sole means of saving the university from itself. The expression "common sense" is also used throughout the book as though it were an unloaded term, though it might easily be used



by government ministers to defend their radical restructuring of higher education. After all, in our increasingly commodified culture it can too easily appear "right and proper" that one should pay for one's education.

This idea is, however, another government-speak cliché that is held up to scrutiny by Maskell and Robinson, as is the whole apparatus of the New University: the extracting of huge fees from students and their parents, the interminable quality inspections, the churning out of more and more pieces of so-called "research" designed solely with money-generation in mind, the proliferation of managers with their ugly, insensitive, self-serving ideas about turning universities into profitable business ventures. These and other pernicious features of the university as it presently stands or is trying to become are all spelt out in *The New Idea of the University* and taken to task with much pertinent and constructive argument.

This book should be taken seriously by those who determine the fate of the university, including staff, students and potential students, as well as those ministers and administrators who have been influential in carrying out the immense restructuring of recent years. To reverse the process that has ruined what were once, whatever their problems and contradictions, important centres of intellect and invention will not be easy. As Maskell and Robinson all too convincingly indicate, "The real crisis in British education is not at the bottom, amongst an underclass, but at the top, amongst those in charge." (P. 144)

### Notes

1. Bryan Ferry, "Street Life", included on the Roxy Music LP/CD *Stranded*, EG Records, 1973.