

EDUCATION CHANGES: THE HIDDEN AGENDA

The proposals for Modularisation, Credit Accumulation and Credit Transfer (MOCACT) currently under consideration at universities have profound implications for students. Yet there has been virtually no consultation with student bodies. Why?

Proponents of MOCACT argue that it will increase student choice; enlarge the range of qualification levels; increase freedom of student movement between institutions; and generate a greater degree of student (consumer) power. In the abstract these all seem highly attractive. However, behind MOCACT lies the barely hidden government agenda to *get education on the cheap*. In simplifying education, in turning it into series of separable, purchasable commodities (modules) that can be 'pic-n-mixed', over time and between institutions, MOCACT paves the way for the allocation of education by the market with competition between institutions, aimed at the provision of faster, cheaper, lower quality education. However they are presented, these proposals are ultimately quite simply about money – about the students paying it, the university making it and the government saving it.

Students will firstly pay *directly in cash*. MOCACT can only be understood in the context of the underfunding of all education since the mid 1970s – the real cuts in student grants, the loss of benefits, the introduction of loans, cuts in the money given to institutions of higher education and so on. The logic is simple: if students are increasingly made to pay for education, they will *want* what the government wants – education on the cheap – and they will be (economically) forced to impose this demand on educational institutions. MOCACT clears the way for a 'learn as you can afford to' approach (accumulate your credits as you can afford them, transfer to a cheaper institution if necessary) and the ending of free, quality education properly funded. Secondly, students will

also pay *indirectly in quality*, for the price of the 'product' will necessarily become crucial. Institutions will be drawn into price wars to attract students who are increasingly paying for their education: cost cutting, not quality, will be the key. If you are having to pay for your education and have little or no money, you will be forced to seek the cheapest possible 'product'. MOCACT facilitates the provision of this: shorter 'degrees', 'seminars' of at least 25-30 persons, the likely elimination of free services such as library and computer facilities, laboratory materials and so on. The developments in the polytechnic sector over the last five years reveal how real this threat is: a 35% increase in student numbers (with more planned) backed by a paltry 5% real increase in funding. You will not know that you have been short changed until it is too late. In reality, therefore, these policies will diminish real choice, not increase it as claimed; they will reduce education to the lowest common denominator. No doubt 'elite' private and semi-private institutions offering 'quality' education will spring up (as in the US) for those who can afford to pay the going market price. But they will, of course, be beyond the financial reach of most. In the US students who cannot afford the fees of \$16,000 per annum at Harvard and Yale and other top quality institutions have to accept the cheaper, much poorer quality education available at state schools. Do we really want to go down that road?

MOCACT will also promote uniformity of education, for, unless the courses at your institution are fairly 'standard', you will be unable to accept the first or second year students of another. Innovation, imagination, creativity and critique in education will be undermined; homogeneity will predominate and will, indeed, become crucial to market success. Easy transferability will become central to institutional money-making. Needless to say, staff will be repeatedly reminded of the 'realities' of

modern (market) life.

The claim that MOCACT will increase access to higher education is just as fraudulent. The real problem of access to higher education is not and never has been 'time', nor 'flexibility', nor location, it has always been *money*, the refusal by government to properly fund good quality education. MOCACT is a Trojan horse by which this albatross can be removed from the neck of governments of all political colours.

Finally, in enthusiastically endorsing these proposals, the University continually stresses the ways in which they will enhance student 'power'; a remarkable conversion to something they have vigorously opposed in the past! The reason, of course, is that the alleged 'power' that modularisation gives to students is the harmless, disempowering, fragmented power of the individual 'consumer' confronted (on a purely 'take it or leave it' basis) by pre-packaged, 'off the shelf', 'products'. Real student power can only be achieved by greatly increasing student representation on University bodies, on departmental committees and the like; by increasing *collective* student power on the important decision-making committees of the University from Council down. If the University really is a convert to student power, let them give us 50% representation on these bodies. Then we can contribute to discussions on the nature, content and structure of our education. If we are to have a supermarket approach to education we do not want to stand outside the shop, peering in through the window, wondering whether we will ever be able to afford to enter. We want to sit on the Board of Directors and participate in the educational *process*, for that is what education is – a process, not a 'product'! Education, like health and housing, should be a free right over which we have some democratic control.

**The Critical Lawyers Group
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