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**Why our universities should be protected:**

# the activist and student fees

Dr Geeta Lakshmi, Senior Lecturer in the Lincoln Business School: My own alma mater lies thousands of miles away and is currently caught in the throes of celebration after winning an intensive campaign against the suppression of human rights and house arrest. It is also the alma mater of Aung San Suu Kyi , the [...]

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## ***Dr Geeta Lakshmi, Senior Lecturer in the Lincoln Business School:***

My own alma mater lies thousands of miles away and is currently caught in the throes of celebration after winning an intensive campaign against the suppression of human rights and house arrest. It is also the alma mater of Aung San Suu Kyi , the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize winner pro activist who has been fighting for democracy and who was placed under house arrest for the last 15 years. Our educational experiences were separated by over a decade and half yawning between us yet there is comfort in the fact that the classrooms of my university might have fostered some of the greatness in the Burmese leader's psyche. Indeed my university inspired me to rise to new heights and gave me the courage to seek new lands to accomplish my doctorate studies. My teachers were young, enthusiastic and so cool- they were perfect mentors. I am proud of belonging to the alumni of institutions such as Lady Shri Ram College (LSR),

Delhi University (where Aung studied in 1964) and Delhi School of Economics and later on the University of Exeter. Yet it is memories of Lady Shri Ram College which stay with me; as a young undergraduate filled with trepidation and wide-eyed at the prospect of higher education. Little did I realise at that time that my life time would be steeped in the pursuit of higher education, the seeds of which were sown in LSR.

The change in tuition fees saga has unfolded in the last decade or so while I have been teaching in British universities. It will be an interesting experiment, a social brake on the so-called frittering of public money. The knowledge economy which is based on the quaternary sector has relied on a constant supply of graduates to feed to the Gods of banking/finance/civil service/management and many other sectors. Yet the current crisis has made us all question whether university education is worthwhile. Last week's march by students in London has brought out the passion in all of us.

The economics of education will be an exercise which will cause accountants and economists alike to clutch at their calculations with white knuckles. It is argued that graduates will be earning a premium compared to their peers and hence they should pay a top-up for this education. Yet economists also warn of the shaky recovery which lies around the corner and joblessness figures continue to grow. There is growing concern that pension payments will have to rise to meet the looming chasm and this will leave a smaller disposable income. The economy when it recovers in the next five years or so will have to rely on this

indebted graduate to stoke the fire of growth. The taxation of education will give rise to a graduate who will have to content himself/herself with a lower wage. One who will demand a higher return to compensate for the debt burden will be priced out of the global graduate war as other countries who invest in their education will be prepared to offer their wages for lower rates. In such a global market, any discouragement to graduates will levy a social price on the UK economy. Any economy which does not foster entrepreneurship, democracy and pursuit of excellence will fall by the wayside and will be unable to compete with global growth. Again, nations such as China and India have relied on the ready provision of cheap graduates to man the bastions of world industry in the form of services and manufacturing.

The constant threat to university financing sources has already forced institutions to innovate and come up with creative accounting ideas of foreign sponsors, bias towards international students, reduced teaching hours paring away at education and delivering a thinly disguised training programme. Innovation is a great idea but like civil liberties being restricted behind a veneer of house arrest (instead of imprisonment), one wonders whether this creative accounting is taking us down the slippery slope of delivering training instead of education.

The role of university education is not just to teach to do but also to think. In a fast changing world where the tweet and the blog and the Facebook replace meeting places, it is more critical than ever that universities should inspire not

drain their students. The UK, which has always churned out thinkers, authors and designers, should continue to encourage students to embrace education as a pillar of future potential and self actualisation. There is no other institution in life where we actively encourage participants to openly critique, argue and debate, all within in an atmosphere of mutual respect and reflection. After all, it is the thinkers who do things in a different way. And in case you are wondering what Aung studied all those years ago – it was Politics- obviously of a different kind.

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