

Why is Labour hanging our universities out to dry?

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Politics Home [noted this last night](#):

The head of the University and College Union, Jo Grady, has warned that universities face a financial calamity similar to the 2008 banking crisis, accusing the government of being “asleep at the wheel”.

Grady, who took over as the union's general secretary in 2019, is alarmed by the direction politics is taking in the UK, telling PoliticsHome that universities will be "in the firing line of Reform should they be elected", and warning that leader Nigel Farage, whose party is leading in the polls, is laying the groundwork for attacking and closing institutions.

In response, Reform UK said that Grady was “absolutely right” that the party would “combat the educational institutions in this country that are poisoning the minds of our children”.

There are, of course, two elements to this comment, but they share the same root, which is that universities are currently treated as separate entities which can be picked off individually, as the microeconomic theory of the firm suggests, where it is assumed that the failure of one firm is an action independent of the consequences for all others.

This is not true. As Jo Grady points out, when ministers dictate visa policy, fee levels, funding structures, and even the ideological framing of higher education, the result is a system that looks autonomous on paper but is politically and financially dependent in reality, and in that sense, she is right to make a comparison with the banks before the 2008 crash.

Recent government-created pressure in the university sector, most especially driven by the desire to control migration when overseas students have been a massive earner of overseas income for the UK, has resulted in the immediate loss of 4,000 courses and 15,000 jobs in a year, and all the while the government continues to treat universities as if they were private firms expected to compete for revenue, rather than public

institutions serving a social purpose.

The ideological, deeply neoliberal, incoherence in this is dangerous when the sector as a whole is at risk and, for the sake of the country, systemic decisions are required. It appears that ministers cannot think at that level. It also appears that they are happy for universities to be used in the petty ideological race-related disputes that now pass for politics in the UK.

This has not gone unnoticed by Reform, which is openly preparing to turn universities into its next culture-war battleground. Farage and his cohort describe universities as indoctrination camps and are promising to combat their influence using language chillingly reminiscent of the authoritarian playbook now being revived in the US under Trump and in fascist regimes of the past. As Grady rightly warns, attacks on education always begin when those in power fear the independence of critical minds.

The idea that universities can be left to self-govern while the government controls their income, their students, and, increasingly, their political narrative is a very obvious fiction. It is time this was recognised as such. But, more than that, if the university-based higher education system is to survive as a pillar of democracy rather than become another front in the war on truth, then what universities need is secure public funding and political respect for the freedom to think.

If Labour really believed in the importance of universities as places of learning, debate, development and democracy, they would offer that security. By hanging them out to dry, they are creating the basis for Farage to both attack them, and win by destroying their financial viability. Why, as ever, is Labour laying the path to fascism is the question to ask?