University education

Three years and score

A University Education. By David Willetts. Oxford University Press; 432 pages; $32.50 and £25

In 1945 there were 500 universities across the globe. Today there are more than 10,000. As universities continue to displace apprenticeships and the armed forces as the main path to adulthood in the rich world, scrutiny of higher education has increased. In England critics see universities as hotbeds of anti-Brexit provocation and places where censorious students stifle debate. Complaints about hefty fees and lacklustre teaching are common.

David Willetts, Britain’s higher education minister in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and now a Tory peer, argues against those who say the answer is to turn the clock back by cutting student numbers. “A University Education” is not the mix of gossip and post hoc justification normally churned out by former ministers. Instead, Lord Willetts provides something more valuable: an examination of the state of English universities, a defence of the value of a university education and an argument that the provision of higher education should be expanded further.

This may seem curiously egalitarian stuff for a former Conservative minister. Yet Lord Willetts views a university education as akin to home ownership—both are good for society and something that every parent hopes their child will grow up to possess. He cites evidence that graduates are healthier, happier and less inclined to a life of crime. He notes that the graduate wage premium has held up even as the number of students has grown. Attempts by graduates to restrict access to university, he writes, are little more than “educational Nimbyism”.

As a minister Lord Willetts was best known for nearly trebling tuition fees to £9,000 ($14,000) a year in 2012. Some worried that this would dissuade poor pupils from applying. However, thanks to generous government loans, their numbers continued to grow. In policy circles, the debate has moved on to whether the new arrivals benefit from university study, which is often in less research-orientated institutions, or whether the money would be better spent on other forms of education.

Here Lord Willetts is no less trenchant. He argues that these institutions, which tend to languish near the bottom of research-focused league tables, simply perform a different role. They may produce fewer bankers, judges or Nobel prizewinners, but that reflects their intake, rather than poor tuition. They often add as much value as more prestigious institutions. A recent analysis of graduate salaries by The Economist reached a similar conclusion.

Yet Lord Willetts is far from Panglossian. He traces many flaws in England’s system to the gates of its grandest universities, Oxford and Cambridge. In a brisk history, he tells how, even as the university flourished in Europe, its spread was halted in England by protective measures put in place at the behest of Oxbridge. It was not until the creation of University College London in 1829 that England gained its third university, six centuries after the second.

Oxbridge still provides the metric by which other English universities are judged. This leads to excellent research and strong protection of institutional autonomy. It also means universities draw their students from across the country.control