

## Cuts and Cash Cows

(originally posted on the British Sociological Association blog *Sociology & the Cuts* on 10 March 2011)

Overseas students [are cash cows](#), and universities have been relying upon them as a 'vital source of income' for many years now. In this context, then, the [scandal tying the LSE to the Gaddafi regime](#) is not surprising, and it would be wrong to frame this story as if it were solely the LSE's problem. Rather, I would argue, it is symptomatic of a higher education sector which routinely balances its budgets on the backs of overseas students. Perhaps commentators are right to question the direct line drawn between Saif al-Islam el-Gaddafi's PhD and his £1.5 million donation to the LSE, and although we already know that he paid the Monitor Group to assist him in his thesis research, there is no good evidence thus far that he did not write the thesis himself. But make no mistake: *Saif Gaddafi bought his PhD*.

The reality is mundane. Like thousands of overseas doctoral candidates at universities throughout the UK, Gaddafi bought his PhD by paying tuition fees at the overseas rate. This is what I would presume, at least, since the many accusations leveled of late at the LSE do not include their funding of his degree. Gaddafi [began postgraduate study at the LSE in 2003](#). For the 2004-2005 academic year, according to the [oldest fees table currently available on the LSE's website](#), he would have been paying £10,302 as a full-time first-year PhD student. This was over three times higher than the home/EU rate. Say what you will about philanthropic duty and the transformative possibility of educating the children of dictators; Gaddafi meant money before he had even stepped foot inside its lecture halls.

And therein lies the root of the problem. When these students are income and not expense in the eyes of their institution by default, abuse and embarrassment are both virtually guaranteed. Now, I do not suggest that the UK universities are unique in their practice of using postgraduates as their personal money trees. However, that particular intersection of overseas fees with unfunded doctoral education *is* characteristic and especially dismaying. In the United States, by contrast, aspiring PhD students of any nationality can expect to receive full funding with an offer of admission from a good university. If education is to be a collective public good, granting the academy's highest degree to those most able to pay is not the best way to accomplish it.

In the current climate of funding cuts and de facto privatization, the financial pressures which enabled the LSE/Gaddafi scandal are bound only to become increasingly severe. Universities will make more offers to overseas students with lots of money but questionable qualifications, eyeing both immediate tuition fees and future contributions from grateful alumni and their families. If the rich student turns out not to be quite up to snuff, well, there is incentive to look the other way. Occasional scandal is just the cost of doing business. The outcome seems inevitable: As more and ever more elites from the Global South purchase a UK credential and use it to legitimize their continued domination back home, the very meaning of the university and its mission will come under assault. It might not be what we want, but we lie if one day we say that we did not see it coming.

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