

# JACK DUFFIN

## FOR NUS NATIONAL PRESIDENT

In 1997 education was fundamentally changed in the UK, when the pledge was made that 50 percent of all 18 year olds must go to university. Overnight this made all other routes into the world of work appear second rate. Quality apprenticeships diminished, vocational training plummeted, and those who were not academic were labeled a failure. In my opinion NUS is the perfect vehicle to challenge the ruling elite in this country to improve the dwindling education in this country.



### University

Does the jobs market require this many university graduates? Are there the right qualifications at university to fill the demands of the country? Is academia the be all and end all? The answer to all three is resoundingly, "no". We have hundreds of thousands of university students left with no realistic job prospects after university. Half of students now finishing degrees are stuck in non-graduate jobs so we have to ask what benefit was the university course they paid £27,000 plus living costs to do. I would like to see a return to University taking a smaller number of students, the reduction of tuition fees and a focus of academic degrees being studied at University. Many non-academic degrees are far better suited to a more college environment where they can focus resources onto it, for instance drama and music.

### Grammar Schools

Education used to dramatically change for young people when they took their 11 plus exams. Those that succeeded got onto the ladder of social mobility and those who failed were disregarded in secondary moderns. The government had to do something, cynically, they ripped away social mobility, and sent everyone to secondary moderns, which were rebranded as "comprehensives". Cameron even blamed poor and ethnic minorities for the lack of social mobility, saying, "Social mobility will only rise when those people are persuaded to change those attitudes". While Labour rightly criticised the Conservative elite for talking down young British people, it also offers no ideas for how to fix the problem.

Unfortunately society now talks of social mobility as a relic of the past. There were more working class kids at Oxbridge in the 1960's than there are now. Kids from working class backgrounds who were academically successful used to be able to get the world class education they deserved, that allowed them to get into the top jobs in this country. The top 5 schools now send more kids to Oxbridge than the bottom 2000 put together. Those lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon can afford to buy top quality education and take the jobs. World class education should be available to the brightest students, not just the richest.

The old grammar system was built around the tripartite system of Maths, English and Verbal Reasoning, I don't propose, nor do I agree with a return to a narrow and blinkered examination system. Instead we need a diverse and inclusive system that will look at a broad range of evidence and subjects to decide if a child is academic enough to go to a grammar.

A recent YouGov poll showed that 80 percent of students want the return of grammar schools as they believe it would give them a better education than they currently have. The current competition to get a place is incredible. Approximately 1500 sit the 11 plus exam for each remaining grammar school in an attempt to get one of the 180 places available. While the general public are throwing their weight behind a grammar school system, the privately schooled Westminster elite remain strongly opposed. Could this be because they want to keep the domination of the highest paid and most powerful jobs to themselves and their children?

We need to make sure young people are the best they can be by the time they get to university. By improving secondary education, university education standards will also rise. A modern grammar school system would not be perfect for everyone, but no system ever will be. Some children develop later, but a cut off point has to be made. With such a notion, we get children being kept in academic education until 18 where they could have learned a skill to a respectable level, and be doing a proper apprenticeship from 16.

## Vocational

For many years now, non-academics have been thrust on to the scrap heap, the comprehensive system has meant that you can only be an academic or a failure. I would much rather see the creation of vocational colleges, where you people can study a core skill (building, plumbing, mechanic, etc.), basic english, maths and science. A business qualification as many of these people will work in their own or for an SME. An accounting qualification as they will need that skill if they are unemployed. Lets embrace them and allow them to be employable and important people in society.

I also feel it is essential that a style of business qualification is taught at these technical schools as the majority of these students are likely to work in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) or set up their own. Someone learning a part of the building trade could study till 16, do a two year apprenticeship and then set up their own company at 18.

Once we have young people graduating from schools with a quality understanding of the skill that they will use for work, apprenticeships will follow. The irrational politicians that dominate the front benches in the House of Commons don't seem to understand that businesses don't want to just employ anyone. Skilled school leavers create quality apprenticeships that leads to jobs for young people and a reduction in youth unemployment.

There seems to be a concept that someone who is non-academic is poorer and less important than those who excel academically. But it is essential to have a society that has a varying skills base. Wages aren't much different when comparing a technically-skilled electrician and an academically-skilled university lecturer.

## Cost of living

The current means testing model that student finance runs by is completely flawed. The poorest are given good support to get them through university. The middle classes are forced to part fund their child through university. We need to have a system where everyone is supported, just because someone's parents has more money than others does not mean by default they will give all the money needed to support their children.

Students shouldn't have to work to put food on the table. No one is arguing that if one wants to party, or go on a night out, then sure, working part-time is an option. But student finance needs to be reshaped so no full-time-student has to worry about a roof over their head.

