

Dorling, D. and Hennig, B. (2017) Let's say Auf Wiedersehen to England's embarrassing tuition fees, The Guardian, December 19th, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/19/england-embarrassing-tuition-fees-germany-no-fees>

Let's say Auf Wiedersehen to England's embarrassing tuition fees

Just look at Germany: no university tuition fees, no fat-cat pay scandals. The UK system is indefensible



There was fury when Cologne's vice-chancellor's salary rose €55,000 in six years. It didn't happen again. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Danny Dorling and **Ben Hennig**

Tuesday 19 December 2017 07.00 GMT

As pay scandals continue to embarrass British higher education, with university chiefs receiving eye-watering [salaries](#)¹ and [golden handshakes](#),² it's time to ask: why can't we be more like Germany?

A [scandal](#)³ erupted there a few years ago when the vice-chancellor of Cologne University increased his salary from €78,876 (£69,403) a year in 2006 to €133,781 in 2012. In 2014 a [table](#)⁴ revealing this was leaked, [prompting outrage](#).⁵ Since then top salaries in German universities have been held in check. Germany is far from perfect, but we can only wish we had its problems.

Vice-chancellors' pay has soared since the introduction of £9,000 annual tuition fees throughout the UK, except for Scottish students studying in Scotland.⁶ Meanwhile, in Germany, where universities are supported through general taxation and there are no fees, vice-chancellors seem to survive on relatively modest remuneration. Globally, the US has the highest senior pay levels in universities – and a large [student debt bubble](#).⁷ As in Britain, the richest students in America do not take out loans; instead their parents pay up front. Is this a system to emulate?

Recently the Higher Education Policy Institute think-tank suggested that the most important reason to support the English student loan system was that it had [allowed an increase in student numbers](#).⁸ But those numbers are not at German levels.

In 1995 some [732,000 babies were born in the UK](#)⁹ and 765,000 in [Germany](#)¹⁰ – just 33,000 more. And yet 21 years later, in 2016, in Britain there were 2.28 million students at higher education institutions, of whom [1.75 million](#)¹¹ were undergraduates. In [Germany](#)¹² in 2016 there were 2.81 million students – 530,000 more than in the UK. Of these German students, 1.78 million were at traditional universities and another 0.96 million at universities of applied sciences. The number of German students rose by almost a million in the 20 years to 2016.

Since 1995 German universities have been making considerable efforts to recruit more foreign students, even though they don't pay fees either.

Numbers have more than doubled in that period to 0.36 million. The recent German coalition government [aimed for 350,000 by 2020](#),¹³ and the target was reached three years ahead of time. The reason was the recognition that universities are better and more interesting places if they are diverse. When it comes to spending money and the public good most mainland Europeans think differently from Britain.

In [Germany](#),¹⁴ education is a devolved matter of the federal states so specific conditions vary slightly, but there are no fees in any state aside from a general payment of a few hundred euros for administrative costs. In many cases this covers a free public transport pass, discounts on food in university canteens and other perks that students in most of the UK have to pay for on top of their tuition fees.

Education in Germany is seen as a public good, something that [benefits society as a whole](#),¹⁵ rather than a product that can be sold to enhance an individual's career prospects.

Some federal states have started a debate about introducing tuition fees for non-EU students. This year, the state of Baden-Württemberg introduced an annual €3,000 fee for those from outside the EU, provoking considerable [controversy](#)¹⁶ and leading to a drop in international student numbers. It seems unlikely it will become a trend – several German states began charging small tuition fees for all students about a decade ago, but one by one abolished them again.

Britain is very different. One group of [researchers has suggested](#)¹⁷ that since higher student fees enable high pay for vice-chancellors, this results in better university education. As with healthcare, however, the best education is provided when profit is not a motive. If that principle is not accepted, the risk is we'll get a "[Trump university](#)"¹⁸ system.

In [2015 the Higher Education Policy Institute](#)¹⁹ said: “People in England, Wales and Northern Ireland often ask, if Germany can abolish tuition fees, why can’t we? Part of the answer is that Germany sends a lower proportion of young people to university and spends less on each one.”

This was, and still is, not true. A larger number and higher proportion of young people in Germany go to university than in the UK. Additionally, according to a report from [Ucas last week](#),²⁰ the proportion of poorer students going to university in Britain has fallen compared with the richest (many of the wealthiest fifth will incur no debt as their parents pay their fees up front).

The new “multiple equality” measure of deprivation Ucas now uses is the best way of gauging trends in the social equality of a university’s intake. Its new data is a strong indication that the introduction of high student fees and loans has not widened access – it has done the opposite.

Talking about pay is embarrassing. Making simple numerical mistakes can be embarrassing. Not understanding how young people can be so well educated for free in another European country is embarrassing. Student fees in the UK cannot be defended – they’re just embarrassing.

Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at Oxford University. Ben Hennig was educated in Germany and is a lecturer at the University of Iceland.

¹ Weale, S. and Adams, R. (2017) Ex-Bath Spa University vice-chancellor gets final year £429k payout, *The Guardian*, December 6th, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/06/ex-bath-spa-university-vice-chancellor-gets-final-year-429k-payout>

² Busby, M. (2017) Sussex University head paid £230,000 'golden handshake' – report, *The Guardian*, December 9th, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/09/sussex-university-head-paid-230000-golden-handshake-report>

³ Deutsche Welle (2017) Free tuition in Germany not attractive for all foreigners, *DW*, February, 24th, <http://www.dw.com/en/free-tuition-in-germany-not-attractive-for-all-foreigners/a-37711964>

⁴ http://www.nachdenkseiten.de/upload/pdf/140217_Bezahlung_Praesidenten.pdf (*still available to access* on 19 December 2017).

⁵ University directors earn up to 70 percent more, Published on 21.02.2014, *Welt*: <https://www.welt.de/regionales/duesseldorf/article125083500/Uni-Rektoren-verdienen-bis-zu-70-Prozent-mehr.html>

⁶ OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2014) *Education statistics at a glance*, Paris: OECD, Chart B3.3 (www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2014_eag-2014-en). 2014 data is still the latest available even in 2017.

⁷ Foroohar, R. (2017) The US college debt bubble is becoming dangerous, *The Financial Times*, April 9th, <https://www.ft.com/content/a272ee4c-1b83-11e7-bcac-6d03d067f81f>

⁸ Hillman, N. (2017) Were student loans designed by the rich to soak the poor? *HEPI blog*, October 27th, <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/10/27/4944/>

⁹ UK births: <http://www.dannydorling.org/books/ukpopulation/Data.html> *including Northern Ireland births*: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/live-births-1887-2015>

¹⁰ <https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/SocietyState/Population/Births/Births.html>

¹¹ Universities UK (2017) *Higher education in numbers* (2015-2016), Last accessed 19th December, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/Pages/higher-education-data.aspx>

¹² DESTATIS (Statistisches Bundesamt, Federal Statistical Office) (2017) Studierende an Hochschulen - Fachserie 11 Reihe 4.1 - Wintersemester 2016/17, *accessed 17th December*, <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/BildungForschungKultur/Hochschulen/StudierendeHochschulenEndg.html> (Excel sheet ZUS-01)

¹³ The PIE News (2013) German coalition treaty aims for 350,000 foreign students by 2020, *PIE news*, December 19th, <https://thepienews.com/news/german-coalition-treaty-aims-350000-international-students-2020/>

¹⁴ on how the UK could be more like Germany: Antonucci, L. (2017) The revolt of the 'squeezed middle': why new cross-society coalitions in British politics are now possible, *Renewal*, 25/3/4, <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/renewal/25-3-4/cross-society-coalition-labour-brexit>

¹⁵ Deutsche Welle (2017) Free tuition in Germany not attractive for all foreigners, *DW*, February 24th, <http://www.dw.com/en/free-tuition-in-germany-not-attractive-for-all-foreigners/a-37711964>

¹⁶ Deutsche Welle (2017) German university tuition fee proposal sparks criticism, *DW*, November, 21st, <http://www.dw.com/en/german-university-tuition-fee-proposal-sparks-criticism/a-41473133>

¹⁷ Murphy, R., Scott-Clayton, J. and Wyness, G. (2017) The end of free college in England: implications for quality, enrolments, and equity, *Centre for Global Higher Education*, Working Paper 30, November, <http://www.researchcghe.org/publications/the-end-of-free-college-in-england-implications-for-quality-enrolments-and-equity/>

¹⁸ Neate, R. (2016) Trump used 'fraud' university to pocket millions, New York attorney general says, *The Guardian*, June 2nd, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/02/donald-trump-university-lawsuit-new-york-attorney-general-fraud>

¹⁹ HEPI (2015) Keeping up with the Germans: What can Germany teach the UK on fees, migration and research? *HEPI Report 77*, Oxford: HEPI <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2015/09/03/keeping-germans-can-germany-teach-uk-tuition-fees-international-students-world-class-research/>

²⁰ Adams, R. (2017) Poorest school-leavers half as likely to attend university as their peers, *The Guardian*, December 14th, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/14/poorest-school-leavers-half-as-likely-to-attend-university-as-their-peers>