

## Free University Brighton: Education for Love, Not Money

Lambros Fatsis in conversation with: Haley Freeman, Jo O' Gorman, Dyanne Parish, and Adam Sauerteig. This article gives the personal views of the authors, not the position of the institutions they work or volunteer for.

In the not-so-immediate, yet still acutely felt, aftermath of [strike action](#) over proposed changes (=cuts) to academics' pensions last winter, debates about who "the University" is and what universities are (for) have taken centre stage; although they have haunted the minds of those working in them for longer than we normally think. Max Weber, during his lecture on [Science as a Vocation](#) at Munich University as early as 1918, puzzled over how bureaucratic the American universities of his time had become, describing the 'American's conception of the teacher who faces him' as follows: 'he sells me his knowledge and his methods for my father's money, just as the greengrocer sells my mother cabbage. And that is all'. In a similar vein, Thorstein Veblen, [also writing in 1918](#), described how '[b]usiness-minded predators who corrupted the scholarly mission of a real university by packaging education in salable units, weighing scholarship in bulk and market-value, promoting the growth of a corps of bureaucratic functionaries, treating faculty as hired hands, firing controversial teachers, raiding other institutions, measuring a university by the size of its bank statement, and selling higher learning to the public by paying obeisance to the rule that the consumer always knows best'. Reading those lines a century after they were committed to paper, many of us who work in the very institutions that Weber and Veblen considered intellectually and morally spent, can't help but feel pessimistic about the future of "the University"; considering that similar, if not identical, complaints are heard when academics ponder the state and nature of Higher Education today. This makes for depressing reading, unless we imagine and pursue education, including Higher Education, outside its current managerial and techno-bureaucratic habitat; as a commitment to teach and learn '*worthily*' by encouraging the 'desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way' ([Thompson, 1976: 791, 721](#)), rather than simply dispensing academic credentials and certificates of questionable value. This may sound utopian, fanciful or unrealistic, yet [Free University Brighton](#) was established in 2012 with exactly that goal in mind. Emerging from a period of protests against the [Browne Review](#), which introduced tuition fees of £9,000 per year, Free University Brighton set itself up as an alternative to fee-paying education with the aim of offering university-level education as a practice of desire for teaching and learning; free of charge, and free from the institutional confines of conventional universities.

### What and Who is Free University Brighton?

Free University Brighton is primarily made up of a team of academic volunteers who teach a bewilderingly diverse group of adult learners from virtually all backgrounds and abilities in public spaces, not self-enclosed campuses. All courses/activities are entirely free, and anyone can join with the only condition being that students are committed to attending and

participating in the courses offered. In return they receive high-quality, University-level education that spans the whole three years of undergraduate study, and can be awarded an [independently validated](#) degree (we call it “Freegree”). In addition to all that, as members of such a co-operative, we pride ourselves on the democratic organisation of Free University Brighton, given that students actively participate on decision-making processes about the content of the courses offered, the degree of learning support offered in terms of study skills sessions and mentoring, as well as our future plans as an independent, public education collective. As this thumbnail sketch of Free University Brighton makes clear, *what our University is* very much depends on *who it is* and *who we are*. Free University Brighton, therefore, *is* its teachers and learners as well as the outcome of the interactions between us, with no intervention from, supervision by, or tutelage of any funding body.

This independence of means, thought, and action is as enviable as it is rare in mainstream university institutions, and highlights just how much autonomy academics and students have lost in their encounter with education and scholarship as a corporate endeavour which treats academics as racehorses and students as cash cows. Our tutors and our students, therefore, are not merchants and buyers of education but partners in a common project, a movement even, that serves as a reminder that different social arrangements are possible, if we marshal the powers of our imagination. Indeed, this very blog post embodies what and who Free University Brighton is; as it was written by a tutor and four students in conversation with each other.

### **Why join?**

Our reasons for joining proved to be as varied as we are. Most of us, however, stressed that we were interested in keeping our brains alive, exploring areas of interest like crime, social inequality, social movements, philosophy or research methods, as well as voicing and developing a political view in conversation with others. The opportunity to learn and “do” social science without worrying about fees, competing with others, or completing compulsory assessments was also a bonus given that it allows us to participate in education without being penalised for it in terms of unnecessary monetary or psychological pressures. The very idea of pursuing knowledge for knowledge’s sake seemed a radical one and positively contrasted the experience of some of us who have gone through mainstream Higher Education. All this is embodied in Free University Brighton’s ethos and also informs the content of the courses as well as the teaching style and approaches that are adopted by the tutors. And while intellectual satisfaction is a key reason why most of us joined, the social element was also immensely important as it allowed many of us to meet new people and make friends not just with fellow students but tutors too.

### **What our experience has been**

Although all four of us belong to different years of study, we find the experience demanding and sometimes challenging, given the high level of courses offered. This is compensated for,

however, by the inclusive nature of Free University Brighton and the ability and willingness of the tutors to explain, engage, and relate to students; demonstrating their genuine passion for and commitment to their subject and students too. This makes the learning experience an exciting one, giving us a buzz and a sense of excitement associated with the joy of learning, participating and being heard in group discussions held in class. Indeed, we all agreed that part of what keeps us going is this sense of excitement, ecstasy even, that we got from the intellectual stimulation that the sessions offered; urging some of us to describe our experience as one that could be likened to taking a substance. And while there are some improvements to be made in terms of organisation of the entire “Free-gree”, most of us would describe it as a beautiful chaos which has helped us challenge, if not change, our worldview and life choices too.

### **(Why) does Free University Brighton matter?**

Lambros is often teased for repeatedly saying that Free University matters because it offers education for free, but also frees education from its institutional confines. Given its commitment to broadening the scope and remit of university-level education, it should also be thought as a “u-diversity” rather than a “uni-versity”; the difference here being between celebrating difference and the impulse to homogenise. This speaks to what we, as students, recognise as an alternative to mainstream education characterised by intellectual honesty and authenticity which opposes the idea of education as a privilege but rather treats it as a public good that should be available to all. Free University Brighton, therefore, matters not only because it offers free education, in all senses of the word, but also because it opens up different ways of learning and political participation too; inspiring a community feeling through empowerment and entertainment, given that our tutors lift us up and remind us of the power that imagination has in making us think about as well as bring about different social arrangements.

At a time when anger and despair seem to dominate our political reality, the hope that initiatives like Free University Brighton offers becomes all the more important. As a community/co-operative endeavour, it is inspired by and further inspires a politics of the commons which recognises civil society as an essential part of the political process. This is often obscured by our habitual clinging to political parties and their interests; erroneously considering them as the only medium for voicing our views or concerns as active, democratic citizens. The price we pay for that is not only a lack of independence of thought, but also the kind of disempowerment and disenfranchisement that Free University of Brighton was set up to challenge and replace by bringing citizens back into the realm of citizenship through education, dialogue, and collective action.

For more information about the Free University of Brighton, visit: [www.freeuniversitybrighton.org](http://www.freeuniversitybrighton.org) or follow @FreeUniBrighton on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.