

CHISELLED FEATURES

PAUL VICENTE



The weather may have been a bit warmer and the rain fell, but that did not deter sculptors and visitors to the London Ice Festival at Canary Wharf yesterday. Five teams of sculptors took part in a carving competition but these two budding artists joined in the fun, fashioning a penguin out of a block of ice.

Middle-class students face £7,000 wallop

Jack Grimston

STUDENTS from middle-class families may be denied grants and cheap loans and be charged higher tuition fees under a "double whammy" to be considered by a government review of university funding.

It could add nearly £7,000 a year to the cost of university for a student from a family with an income of £50,000 a year.

The higher charges are being advocated after Lord Mandelson, the first secretary of state, announced £950m of cuts to higher education. Costs are expected to increase, whoever wins the general election.

Lord Browne, the chairman of the government review, has the task of producing more money for universities without extra cost to the taxpayer and is expected to look favourably on cuts to what critics claim are middle-class subsidies.

The Conservatives are also



Mandelson: £950m cuts

Grants and loans

Maintenance loan £4,207

Loan for tuition fees £3,225

Annual entitlement of full-time undergraduate from family with £50,000 income

Total support £7,876

Maintenance grant £538

SOURCE: Student Loans Company

expected to favour cutting grants and loans for those on higher incomes after George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, said last week that the party would slash benefits for the better-off to tackle the public-sector deficit.

In addition, Browne, who

will report after the election, has come under pressure to recommend raising annual tuition fees to at least £5,000 from the present ceiling of £3,225.

Critics of the grants and loans system - which subsidises poorer students on family incomes of up to £60,000 - believe some of the money should go to poorer students and some to university coffers to help recoup the Mandelson cuts.

Browne's recommendations on grants and loans will have as much importance for family finances as increases in fees - more than half the average £23,000 student debt derives from living costs, and accommodation fees are rising at an estimated 10% a year.

"That is the issue - that in the design of the student loans system, whether we lost sight of directing it at those families that were most in need," said Paul Wellings, vice-chancellor of Lancaster University and chairman of the 1994 Group of research institutions. "The subsidy falls virtually on everybody rather than being directed to the very poorest families."

Steve Smith, president of Universities UK, added: "[Universities] get what is left after students receive their support."

"Putting back support to those on higher incomes is an obvious area [to recoup money]. The current arrangements are a major subsidy to the middle class as it comes out of taxpayers' receipts."

The strongest opposition to cutting grants and loans has come from the Million+ group of new universities, which believes they should instead be extended to part-time students. Only those on full-time courses are currently covered.

Browne will also consider plans to claw more money back by ending subsidised interest rates, which reduce the amount graduates have to pay back.

The taxpayer loses one third of all the money given out in student loans because of subsidised interest rates. This proposal will be presented to Browne by Professor Nicholas Barr of the London School of Economics, who designed the present funding system.

Barr also supports restricting grants to families on incomes of less than about £25,000.

Much of the crisis in university funding was caused when Gordon Brown came to power in 2007 and increased the entitlements to student support of families on middle incomes. All students are entitled to

loans to cover tuition fees. In addition, those on family incomes of £25,000 may now claim grants for living costs of £2,906 and loans of £3,497.

Even those on incomes of £30,000-£50,000 are entitled to loans of at least £3,564 a year.

These costs are now seen as increasingly unaffordable, taking 28% of all higher education funding.

However, Smith warned that the government should not rely on changes to grants, loans and fees to fill the gap caused by the slashing of higher education funding.

"They think they can make the spending cuts because Lord Browne will come up with an answer," said Smith. "I am not clear that he will."

Staff cuts

Universities are preparing to slash academic staff and courses to cope with deep government spending cuts, threatening students with soaring class sizes and poorer teaching.

The staff reductions, some of which had begun before Lord Mandelson recently confirmed cuts of £950m in higher education spending, will hit institutions including Leeds, Bristol, Imperial College London, King's College London, Sheffield and Sussex.

Even science courses, which the government has pledged to protect, as well as subjects such as modern languages, are facing significant cuts.

The University and College Union has warned that more than 14,000 jobs may be at risk.

Next month, the government's funding council will tell each university how much money it has lost.

Pam Tatlow, the chief executive of Million+, said: "Students and the fees review cannot be expected to square the circle of spending cuts either through reductions in student support or increases in fees." *By afraid, parents, News Review, page 9*

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Press Complaints Commission

Mrs Deborah Rundle complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an approach by a reporter to her daughter after the death of her son raised a breach of clause 5 (intrusion into grief or shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complainant's son, Toby, had died at university on October 8, 2009, and there was speculation that he had taken his own life. Mrs Rundle complained that coverage of the incident in the *Sunday Times* was inaccurate and intrusive.

While the PCC investigation was ongoing, another reporter from the paper contacted the complainant's daughter through Facebook. She informed the reporter that the family did not wish to speak in view of the ongoing complaint. The reporter then asked about the details of the complaint, sending a copy of the article to the complainant's daughter so she could highlight what was wrong with it. This upset Mrs Rundle's daughter.

The managing editor apologised for this second approach, explaining that the reporter was a freelance and was unaware of the PCC complaint. However, he accepted that the reporter should not have continued questioning Mrs Rundle's daughter

once the complaint had been mentioned. The reporter understood her error and apologised for it. Nothing from the correspondence would be used in any future article. Additionally, all section editors and deputies had been alerted to the complaint and told not to contact the family. The paper also offered to send a private letter of apology to the family.

Adjudication
It was regrettable that a communication failure at the newspaper resulted in a further approach being made to the family despite the fact that there was an outstanding complaint about the previous coverage. It would also have been sensible for the reporter not to have pursued the matter directly with Mrs Rundle's daughter once the complaint had been brought to her attention. The combination of these two factors led the commission to conclude that the handling of this approach was intrusive in breach of clause 5, and the complaint was upheld on this point.

A further complaint about an article headlined "Harry Potter student found hanged in his Oxford room" published in the *Sunday Times* on October 11, 2009, was not upheld.

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