

Bribes for the young would work wonders for the labour market

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Europe does not have enough workers to pay for its pensioners. This is why France is in flames (although *voiture enflammée* always has been as much a national dish as *crème brûlée* on the other side of the Channel) and it is why the British government is trying to work out how it can increase our pension age yet further without causing riots.

The latest proposal, floated by Mel Stride, the work and pensions secretary, is that although most of us, at some stage, will not be allowed to retire until the age of 68, those who have done manual work will be able to claim their pensions earlier. Fair enough. It is hardly realistic to expect a bricklayer still to be clambering up ladders when they are nearly 70, although plenty do.

The other group given a get-out-of-jail-free card will be those who did not go to university. The logic is that they entered the workforce at least three years earlier and, while their contemporaries were skipping lectures and failing to inhale, they were contributing to the economy.

It is not a silly idea but if the government did get around to instituting it, we taxpayers would not benefit for decades to come.

There is a simpler, more direct solution: bribe people to enter the jobs market rather than go to university. After all, what do most students learn doing three years of fashion marketing at some university except how to cancel favourite childhood authors and learn all 78 gender pronouns?

The bribe would come in the form of a substantial discount on tuition fees for school leavers who do not immediately go to university but instead work for two years. This is the intriguing suggestion of Rory Sutherland, who is neither a pensions expert nor an educationalist but an advertising executive. He is the vice-chairman of Ogilvy Group, which you might suspect makes him supremely ill-qualified to sort out Britain's over-bloated higher education system and undernourished employment market.

He is a very good adman, though, and used to be much sought-after on the after-dinner and conference speaking circuit for his entertaining insights into behavioural economics, a beat now almost entirely swallowed by podcasting, which is where you will mostly hear him ply his trade. Track him down, he's fun.

I learnt from him that the Quooker hot tap was invented by the same Unilever team that developed instant soup. What was the point of making minestrone in a jiffy, if you had to then wait five minutes for a kettle to boil?

I share his view that too many children go to university. In 1950 only 3.4 per cent of young people went to university; by the time I was there in the mid-1990s it was still less than 20 per cent. The latest figures show that it is now 53 per cent.

I loved university and think that for many children it is an amazing three (or four) years to find out more about themselves and to discover independence but I am the very last generation to have enjoyed the experience without having to pay a penny towards the cost.

Now the average student leaves with £45,800 of debt, but only 20 per cent are expected to pay it back in full. Indeed, the government itself forecasts that the value of outstanding loans will be about £460 billion by the mid-2040s, so giving some people a discount for attending is not going to add much to that debt pile.

As Sutherland says, in the pre-Blair years a university degree was sufficient to get you a reasonably good starting job but it was not necessary. When we expanded higher education a degree became necessary but not sufficient. There are tons of jobs that are not particularly intellectually taxing that nonetheless are closed off to those that did not study beyond school.

There are potentially millions of perfectly able, bright school leavers who feel compelled to take on debt and delay earning any money because we have told them that most decent jobs require a spurious qualification in dance, social work or photography when, in most cases, their ability to dance, undertake social work or take photographs is irrelevant to the posts they are taking on.

If they had a chance to try out work before university they might discover that they love the independence and freedom that comes with a job. Sure, many might after a couple of years decide that they wanted to study at university but by this stage not only would they have a clearer idea about what they wanted to do, but the British economy would have had the advantage of their labours.

Because we need more young people in the workplace. All the talk of fiftysomethings hitting the golf course has masked a less pronounced but more worrying trend. According to Office for National Statistics data, it is the 18 to 24 age group that has caused the largest increase in economic inactivity, not the early retired people. Some of it is because of mental health problems. Most of it is school leavers, adrift and uncertain about what they should do, choosing university because that is what many of their cohort are doing. Would it not make sense for some of those to get a job and start paying taxes?

Encouraging school leavers to work before, or instead of, university would break the assumption that if you are aspirational you automatically have to go to Ikea to buy a kettle and some mugs and spend three years listening to lectures online.

Also, by demanding that most good jobs require a degree, we have somehow perpetuated the idea that once you leave uni, you stop learning, which just is not true. This week, at work, I learnt about the origins of the hot tap – a bit of corporate history that I intend to bore people with for days to come.

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