

The Observer should not offer column inches to allow Oxford College principals to denigrate other universities

Martin Paul Eve

Professor of Literature, Technology and Publishing

Birkbeck, University of London

4 October 2020 (last updated 6 September 2026)



Cite as: Martin Paul Eve, "The Observer should not offer column inches to allow Oxford College principals to denigrate other universities", *eve.gd: Martin Paul Eve*, October 04, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.59348/z0y3c-bg226>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59348/z0y3c-bg226>

Available at: <https://eve.gd/2020/10/04/the-observer-should-not-offer-column-inches-to-allow-oxford-college-principals-to-lie-about-other-universities/>

Today, in the *Observer*, the Sunday national newspaper of the liberal Guardian Media Group, Will Hutton offered a sobering retrospective of the university crisis during the Covid pandemic, from his position as the former principal of Hertford College, Oxford.

The major problem is that, amid some perhaps truthful analysis, Hutton offered an outright lie that is singularly unhelpful: ‘few beyond the Russell Group’, Hutton claims, ‘go beyond online lectures to offer online seminars and tutorials, so raising questions about the justification for £9,250 tuition fees’.

Hutton appears completely clueless about the university sector and its response if this is what he believes. At Birkbeck, even at the height of the crisis, when we pivoted, by emergency, to online teaching, we offered our seminars online. We have spent the summer preparing to run the vast majority of our tutorials and seminars online for the coming year, if necessary, for everyone’s safety and to avoid disruption. If the degree of disbelief on Twitter is anything to go by, other universities, likewise, have been getting ready to run – and now offer – their seminar teaching online. Colleagues at Royal Holloway, Nottingham Trent University, Staffordshire University, Anglia Ruskin University, the University of East Anglia, Oxford Brookes, Wolverhampton, the University of Suffolk, Keele, Kent, Hull, Salford, Manchester Met, the University of Central Lancashire Kingston, Huddersfield, and many others have taken to social media, fed up to their back teeth at the fact that the *Observer* has simply printed a lie about the vast majority of UK institutions.

Giving a voice to powerful figures in higher education in order to let them falsely denigrate the parts of the sector is not good. It would be like giving an opinion column to Richard Branson and allowing him to say ‘airlines outside the Virgin group are not even flying any more and have removed their wings’, despite all evidence to the contrary. Universities are having a hard enough time as it is, without this kind of false distinction being made.

References

This reference list has been generated, in many cases, through an automated process and may therefore contain errors or incomplete metadata. It is provided purely as assistance for finding the items mentioned within this post.

Begiato, Joanne, 'Prof Joanne Begiato She/Her (@JBHist) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/JBHist/status/1312692642208194560>>

Britt, M-K, 'M-K Britt (@Mkbrit) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/Mkbrit/status/1312732983900676102>>

Bunting, Jane, 'Jane Bunting (@DrMJBunting) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/DrMJBunting/status/1312697110748372992>>

Cage, Alix, 'Alix Cage (@alixcage) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/alixcage/status/1312730325257248769>>

Davies, Bill, 'Bill Davies (@BillJDavies) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/BillJDavies/status/1312731533443248129>>

Hutton, Will, 'I saw up close the trials of university life in a pandemic. We should have done better...', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2020

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/04/i-saw-up-close-the-trials-of-university-life-in-a-pandemic-we-should-have-done-better>>

JackieEm, 'JackieEm (@minshyjay) on X', X (formerly *Twitter*), 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/minshyjay/status/1312727197698928641>>

Jenny Woodley Nottingham Trent University staff profile <<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/arts-humanities/jenny-woodley>>

Melia, Matt, 'Matt Melia (@DocMelia) on X', X, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/DocMelia/status/1312731197903179776>>

Noel-Tod, Jeremy, 'Jeremy Noel-Tod (@jntod) on X', *X*, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/jntod/status/1312675226841493505>>

Roberts, Adam, 'Adam Roberts (@arrroberts) on X', *X*, 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/arrroberts/status/1312726671854886913>>

Tweet from Staffordshire University academic on online teaching

<<https://twitter.com/MDG1122/status/1312721910237724672>>

Whitfield, Sarah K., 'Sarah K. Whitfield not posting here anymore! (@sarahinthepark) on X', *X*
(formerly *Twitter*), 4 October 2020

<<https://twitter.com/sarahinthepark/status/1312679785886371840>>