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Footpath

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EDITORIAL

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Nice Work (If You Can Measure It)

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An editorial on the present state of the humanities in British universities with reflections on problems of finance and research funding that Russian readers will recognise.

Key words: Humanities; British Universities; student fees

One of the most popular books on the ORF Contemporary English Literature programme is David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1989), which updates the setting of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* to a 1980s redbrick university. Robyn Penrose, an academic who likes deconstructing texts, finds her own comfortable world threatened by a work-exchange scheme ; she is required to spend rather more time than she would like with Vic Wilcox, the manager of a local engineering firm. Lodge's narration pokes gentle fun at her academic snobbery, and her obliviousness to the world around her. The Thatcher government are making swingeing cuts to the public sector, but Robyn is too preoccupied with feminist scholarship to pay much attention. Only when her job comes under threat does she realize no-one is above society, or immune from its changes.

This world might seem very different from the quadrangles and high tables of Oxford, the British university you are most likely to have visited if you are reading this editorial. Yet it speaks with sufficient urgency to the crisis in British universities today that at Southampton, where I have worked for the last five years, it was chosen as the first novel new undergraduates would read on their English course. The questions that Robyn Penrose is forced to ask - what is higher education for? what benefit does it have to society? what good is an English degree? – are the very same ones that students and teachers in Higher Education have been asking,