

Britain's further education cuts cause working class students to drop out

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The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has produced the first ever league tables showing the relationship between social background and achievement at university. Using post-code, social class and schools data from 165 universities and colleges of higher education in Britain, the tables reveal an overall drop-out rate among students of one in five. A closer examination clearly shows the widening gap between the elite universities and newer institutions with a less privileged intake.

The report states: "In general a higher proportion of mature entrants than young entrants do not continue in higher education after their first year, 15 percent of mature compared with 8 percent of young entrants. The non-continuation rate for young entrants is below 15 percent at nearly all institutions, and for mature entrants it is between 5 and 20 percent at most institutions, but over 20 percent at about one in eight institutions".

The Premier League Table contains most of the traditionally elitist institutions. Oxford has the lowest proportion of state school pupils at 47 percent and Cambridge has 52 percent. Both take only 8 percent of students from working class homes and have graduation rates of 96 percent. Bristol, the London School of Economics and Imperial College are only just below Cambridge, and London's medical schools Royal Free, Guys and St. Thomas have some of the highest concentrations of private school pupils. The tables do not include the proportion of students from selective grammar schools, which would give further evidence of such universities' restricted intake.

At the other end of the scale the University of East London (UEL) takes 94 percent from state schools, with 40 percent from families in the lowest three social groupings. It has a drop-out rate of 36 percent. This was the case among five universities—Central Lancashire,

De Montfort, East London, Glasgow Caledonian and Paisley—who were praised by the HEFCE for being "socially inclusive", but were identified as having abnormally high drop-out rates.

The need to establish a common system of measuring aspects of the performance of Higher Education (HE) was identified in July 1997 by the National Inquiry into HE, the Dearing Committee. One of the most retrogressive steps endorsed by Dearing and adopted wholesale by the new Labour government was the ending of student maintenance grants to all but the poorest and the introduction of fees. This left many students at the mercy of student loans, their parents and often long-hours of part-time work. Dearing's proposals were made despite the admission that "The overwhelming reason for people dropping out is financial hardship. We are wasting public money with students dropping out because the Government is not funding them properly."

The Labour Party-dominated National Union of Students did little to oppose the introduction of fees or to defend grants. Christine Hodgson, the director of communications at the UEL, said "The current loan is dismal and people are put off applying because of the debt."

As well as the introduction of fees, the rate of drop-outs has been exacerbated by cuts in funding. Last year students at the UEL occupied the building in protest against cuts of £2.4 million in this year's budget, with the loss of 80 jobs and the closure of departments. Large numbers of riot police were used against the protest, as a warning to others contemplating similar action.

Whilst the league tables show the widening social gap, higher education is also being increasingly opened up to market forces. Performance tables have been used

in primary and secondary education to intensify competition between institutions for funding and students. The tables will be used to the same end in Higher Education.



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