

# Massive rise in university tuition fees proposed for England and Wales

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Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett has agreed that students might be asked to pay ever-higher tuition fees, opening the way for the privatisation of higher education. Speaking to an audience of representatives from the country's top universities, Blunkett explained that after the next general election there would be a debate on the issue of university funding alongside a new "Dearing" review. It was Lord Dearing's report on the future of higher education, published just after the election of the Labour government in 1997, which heralded the introduction of tuition fees.

Tuition fees are presently set at £1,025 per annum for all universities in England and Wales. Blunkett reiterated official government opposition to the introduction of top-up fees by the more prestigious universities. They would not be introduced during his tenure at the education department, he said, but "I will not be Secretary of State for ever".

The UK's top universities want to be able to charge their students more, increasing their income in the global market for higher education. Many want a US-style system, whereby institutions can charge whatever fees the market will bear. The top-up fee system would enable universities to set their own charges autonomously. An indication of the level of fees being considered is provided by the \$6,000 to 7,000 per year presently charged to overseas students. But speculation based on comparisons with top universities in the US would suggest a figure far higher for the prestigious Oxford and Cambridge universities—up to £20,000 per year.

The universities say this will allow them to raise the extra funds they require to fund research projects and retain their most famous academics. Those who favour allowing market values to arbitrate university

applications gleefully seized upon Blunkett's remarks. They had earlier been cheered by reports that Prime Minister Tony Blair also supports differential fees.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has called on universities to reject the introduction of top-up fees. They point out this would place the most prestigious establishments beyond the financial reach of the majority of students and would contribute greatly to the creeping phenomenon of privatised higher education. A stratified system of education, firmly based upon the student's ability to pay, would mean access being dictated by the class background of the applicant. The NUS is calling on universities to retain the present system, which they claim is based upon "equality not elitism".

The union complains that the extension of top-up fees abrogates the principle of equal access to higher education. However, the NUS supported the initial introduction of tuition fees, which opened the door for the application of market principles in the provision of higher education. Their claim that the present set-up is based on "equality not elitism" is false. Access to higher education is already heavily circumscribed by the applicant's class background. The introduction of top-up fees would nevertheless represent a qualitative shift in access to higher education, catapulting it back to a time when a university place was synonymous with blatant class privilege and naked elitism. The penetration of the market as social arbiter in education would legitimise discrimination against poorer students. Only those with deep pockets would be able to attend the best universities.

Groups representing the top colleges pay lip service to the notion of egalitarianism. The Russell Group, which includes Oxford and Cambridge universities, and the Committee of Vice Chancellors has declared they

would like the extra funds to finance bursary payments for poorer students. Modelled like the scholarship system in America, this would lead to token numbers of working class students being allocated to courses on a strict quota system.

The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of the UK Universities (CVCP) are to hold an inquiry into funding which is due to report in September. They say this is necessary in order for UK universities to maintain their global competitiveness and to expand opportunities for investment. The Russell Group has asked a team of economists to undertake a wholesale review of university funding and to appraise the practical implications of the introduction of top-up fees.

It is said that Prime Minister Blair supports the creation of a “premier league” of 20 universities, no doubt based on the Russell Group, much like the Ivy League in the United States. Because of their reputation and facilities they would be able to offer the best courses and charge students thousands of pounds to attend.

BBC education correspondent Mike Baker has pointed out a number of issues concerning the impact of US-style funding. Public universities are still costly by British standards and fees vary widely from state to state. Students from the state of Michigan pay annual fees of \$6,000 (Approx. £3,600) per year to attend the University of Michigan. Students outside the state pay \$20,000 (£12,000)—living costs not included. A student from outside Michigan will pay at least \$80,000 (£50,000) in fees to obtain a four-year bachelor's degree.

Classes are frequently attended by hundreds of students and communication with lecturers is often by email. Baker says undergraduates are “the cash cows of American universities, herded through vast, impersonal courses”. Michigan, along with other universities, is looking very closely at the potential of degree courses delivered via the Internet. This could turn out to be extremely lucrative, with students enrolling from across the world and paying plenty for the privilege.

The introduction of student loans and fees in the UK is already deterring working class students from pursuing higher education. Research undertaken by John Knowles at the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside found that less than half the potential

students from working class backgrounds are likely to apply for a university place. Almost 80 percent of respondents said fees had limited their choice of institution. The number of applications for university courses from mature students has fallen since the introduction of fees because of fears of incurring large debts. The increase in the number of university dropouts has largely been attributed to older students, unable to cope with financial difficulties or who fall behind with their work due to the demands of part-time working.

The number of students applying to the university clearing system UCAS fell by 1.8 percent in 1999. Universities have already reported £3.5 million in debts owing from students who have failed to pay their tuition costs. A rise in fees would see this figure spiral. The government has initiated a policy of clawing back bursaries paid to poorer students in order to force them to pay tuition fees. Meanwhile, universities are being starved of government funding. University salaries have declined by 30 percent in real terms, while spending per student has fallen by 40 percent in the last two decades.



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