

Britain: University students face worsening conditions, rising debt

The International Students for Social Equality (Britain)
21 May 2008

Recent studies reveal that students in the UK face higher fees and growing levels of debt, coupled with cutbacks in universities.

The Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have made far-reaching and historic attacks on higher education. In 1998, the Labour government legislated to allow universities to charge tuition fees. In 2006, it introduced “top-up fees” for English and Welsh students. Under this system, universities are able to charge students up to a maximum of £3,000 per year.

But even this is set to rise as the government has encouraged the “marketisation” of higher education, with universities increasingly being treated as businesses.

Asked whether universities should be allowed to charge whatever tuition fees they please just before he left office, Blair replied that the university system was “a global marketplace”—i.e., that the universities would always be able to find people somewhere in the world able and willing to pay the going rate.

Just months later, his successor Brown announced plans to remove £100 million of funding from 170,000 mostly part-time students studying for a second degree. The same month saw a private-sector firm granted the power to award degrees for the first time. BPP College of Professional studies, an offshoot of the education firm BPP, will offer truncated two-year post-graduate degrees in law and business-related subjects from the next academic year. The degrees will cost about £10,000 a year.

The principal of BPP said, “We don’t have the *baggage of traditional research*, so we’re focused on customer service” (emphasis added).

In April, the universities secretary, John Denham, announced a consultation paper with proposals for 30,000 new university places to be co-funded by business. Students on these courses, which will be partly designed by employers, will study “business-focused” degrees. Denham said in an interview with the *Guardian*, “If you look at the university system as a whole, and the way in which it engages with employers, it needs to be closer, more intensive, and part of what university offers has got to be tailored for the needs of a very different group of students and the people who are going to be paying for these courses.”

In 2009, the Brown government is to review the impact of implementing top-up fees, and vice chancellors at many universities, including those in the “Russell Group” of leading universities, are proposing they be allowed to charge far higher tuition fees than those currently in place.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published in September showed that in terms of young people entering university—as opposed to those actually finishing degree courses—the UK had fallen below the OECD average. Using the OECD’s definition, 52 percent of young people in the UK enter university, while in Australia, New Zealand and the Scandinavian nations, three quarters of young people enter university after leaving school.

Despite Labour’s much-vaunted expansion of higher education, the OECD found that there was less expansion of higher education in the UK than in South Korea, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The research also

found that only 32 percent of 15-year-olds in the UK expect to go to university—one of the lowest figures throughout the whole OECD.

Research conducted by the Sutton Trust charity showed that “Nearly two-thirds (59 percent) of students who had decided not to pursue study in higher education reported that avoiding debt had affected their decision ‘much’ or ‘very much.’”

The spectre of debt is now also affecting where students intend to study. Nationally, students now pay an average of £9,000 a year in fees. Some 31 percent of those intending to go to university told the Sutton Trust survey that avoiding debt had “much” or “very much” affected their decisions about *where* to study.

The report found that 75 percent of those surveyed were planning or considering a local university and were intending to live with parents/guardians to keep costs down. The survey also found that 72 percent of prospective students intending to live at home cited a desire to minimise debt as “important” or “very important.”

The erosion of education access and campus services has led students at several universities to stage protests in the past few months.

On April 22, hundreds of students protested at the University of Manchester in the northwest of England. The university is the largest single campus in the UK, with some 40,000 students. Protesters gathered to oppose increased tuition fees, vastly reduced teaching hours and contact time, staff cuts, increases in rents, and the lack of library and IT resources and access to facilities.

The university has spiralling debts and has spent tens of millions of pounds on new buildings, whilst the most basic requirements of students and staff are not being met. More than 400 jobs have been shed throughout the university in the last year, and there are more to go.

The protest temporarily closed several roads near the university, including the main Oxford Road artery. Students later occupied the new £31 million Arthur Lewis complex, which has restricted access to undergraduates, who must book an appointment with the relevant member of staff in advance.

According to research conducted by the University of Manchester Students Union, politics students spend an average of just 86 hours per year in lectures and tutorials. Twenty years ago, politics students at the university received 200 hours of teaching a year.

Social Anthropology students were taught for 220 hours per year 20 years ago. This figure has fallen to as little as 120 hours. The survey also found that English Language students “can typically expect to receive between six and eight weekly hours of teaching this semester.”

One of those surveyed, a second-year history student, said she paid £3,070 a year in tuition fees and has only four hours’ tuition timetabled a week. This works out to her paying £28.43 per hour for her education.

At the University of Sussex, management has published restructuring plans that will mean cuts in established areas of study in favour of more lucrative areas such as business and management and international security. The creation of a “Sussex Innovation Centre,” oriented to the

requirements of businesses such as American Express, is under way.

Students have held numerous protest meetings and demonstrations, including the staging of a mock outdoor exam on May 2. Some 150 students participated in the protest in opposition to 30 overseas students being banned from taking tests because they had fallen behind on tuition fee payments. The international students have also had their university library and e-mail accounts cut off until they agree to pay their fees. The protest was followed by students marching to university financial offices, where a petition with 300 signatures was delivered. Up to 50 students from the University of Sussex occupied a business centre on the University campus.

On May 2, students at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland protested against the closure of Fife Park, one of the university's two accommodation halls. The university has decided to replace it with new accommodation, with rents being raised from £52 to between £110 and £130 per week.

A report published last year by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that more than one fifth of UK students at English universities felt they were receiving "poor" or "very poor" value for money. The previous year, before top-up fees were introduced, the number dissatisfied was 15 percent. More than a quarter of students (27 percent) from outside the European Union, who pay up to £12,000 per annum to study in Britain, reported that they received poor or very poor value.

Research by the NUS found that when living costs such as rent, textbooks, utility bills and travel are added, the average cost of a three-year university degree comes to more than £45,000 in London and £39,000 elsewhere. Graduates are often saddled with massive debts and usually find themselves in low-paying jobs, with no relevance to their field of study and expertise.

The numerous protests against rising tuition fees, attacks on campus services and facilities, and the wholesale privatisation of university education express a growing undercurrent of anger against the Labour government and a political shift to the left among a section of students and youth.

In contrast, the Labour-controlled National Union of Students has gone ever further to the right. Its previous commitment to free education, as a right, was formally abandoned at its April conference when NUS delegates voted down a motion calling for a campaign for "Free Education." NUS President-elect Wes Streeting, a member of Labour Students, recently wrote a letter to all NUS members in England.

Acknowledging the developing student opposition to the privatisation of education, he wrote that the NUS "still believe that higher education should be free for students. It isn't ludicrous, it isn't offensive and it isn't selfish."

But, he continued, "sadly, for students in England it isn't realistic, or credible, and it doesn't have any chance of being endorsed by any British government under Gordon Brown or David Cameron."

To emphasise the point, Streeting added, "Let me be clear: we are prepared to accept the notion of a graduate contribution to the costs of higher education."

It was not possible to have a free education system and at the same time have quality, well-resourced education, he continued. Hailing the decision at the NUS conference, he wrote, "Delegates at our conference voted to stop simply arguing for 'free education' in England, and decided instead to consult with our members and bring to the table some radical, imaginative solutions that will be better and fairer for students than regressive and damaging market forces. Only if we do this can we sit down at the same table with the vice-chancellors and the captains of industry, and have our policy taken seriously by the government."

Despite Streeting's ridiculous claim to oppose "market forces" while sitting down with the "captains of industry," the NUS has made clear it is in full agreement with the Brown government that students must pay for

their education.

Such a perspective must be rejected.

The assault on free public education is a product of the subordination of every aspect of economic and social life, in Britain and around the world, to the dictates of the "free market."

The International Students for Social Equality is for a free and universally accessible education system for all who wish to study. This is critical for the development of a truly democratic and egalitarian society, in which the requirements of society as a whole have priority over private profit.

Students must be allowed and encouraged to concentrate on their studies and engage fully in all aspects of campus life, without either being forced to work and/or accumulating massive debts. The ISSE calls for the abolition of the Student Loans system and for students to be freed of all debt obligations and for the re-introduction of grants to be paid for by taxing business.

Students must also have access to the latest Information Technology, textbooks, university libraries, library databases and online resources as part of a high-quality education. Teaching hours and timetables must be re-organised so that lecturers are able to spend the necessary time with their students. Cutbacks at universities and the shedding of staff must be ended and reversed.

Such a programme cannot and will not be implemented by New Labour, its backers in the National Union of Students leadership, or any of the political representatives of the super-rich. The right to education was won by the working class and the socialist movement in decades of struggle. We call on students and all young people to take forward the building of the ISSE at your campus. This is an integral part of the fight for an alternative, international socialist perspective—one that begins from the needs and rights of the vast majority of ordinary working and young people, not the profits of a tiny minority.



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