

Britain: Labour government cuts deny university access to 200,000

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Over 200,000 young people are to be denied a place at English universities in the next academic year due to huge funding cuts imposed by the Labour Party government.

Under conditions in which official unemployment among young people stands at nearly 1 million, demand for university places has increased substantially in the last year. Seven applications are expected for every one place at the 20 leading Russell Group universities. At least 200,000 and as many as 300,000 prospective students may be denied a place at universities this year as a result of the cuts.

Steve Smith, vice chancellor of Exeter University and a representative of Universities UK, said the numbers being denied a university place are set to escalate. “Last year about 160,000 students who applied didn’t end up going to university. This year, we already know that there are about another 75,000 applying for university,” he said.

On February 1, the universities’ funding body HEFCE announced that more than £500 million was to be slashed from university budgets this coming year. For the first time in a decade, universities’ teaching budgets are being cut in a move representing a definitive end to the general expansion in the sector under Labour. HEFCE announced in its letter to university vice-chancellors that some £215 million would be cut from teaching budgets in the academic year 2010-11. Receiving a total of £4.7 billion, this amounts to a cut of 1.6 percent in real terms.

Other cuts confirmed include a 15 percent budget reduction for capital projects, a £40 million cut in funding for old and historic buildings on campuses, £24 million from accelerated and intensively taught postgraduate courses, and £24 million from funding for two-year foundation degrees. Funding provided to

universities used for encouraging those from the poorest backgrounds to apply is also being cut by 0.75 percent to £144 million.

The cuts announced for 2010-11 are the first to be made following government’s announcement of a nearly one £1 billion cut in the higher and further education budgets. A cut of £135 million has been added to “efficiency savings” of £180 million—with a further £600 million across higher education, science and research budgets to follow.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating that overall spending cuts could reach as high as £2.5 billion.

There is also fear among academics that institutions that run university funded museums and galleries will be adversely affected by the cuts. Such museums as the Courtauld Gallery in London, the Manchester Museum, the Ashmolean and the Pitt Rivers in Oxford and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia play a central role in sustaining culture and knowledge. These and other universities together hold 30 percent of the collections that are designated as being of national and international significance.

The denial of a university education to hundreds of thousands of people is a sure indication of the huge growth in social inequality in Britain. This is, in effect, the final stage of a constant process of streaming based essentially on social class that has taken place under Labour at all levels of education in the UK from primary school onwards.

To date, under Labour there has been a general increase in poorer 18- and 19-year-olds going to university. Today 30 percent are more likely to enrol at university than they were in the mid-2000s. This was bound up with the expanding economy inherited by the

Labour government of then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997. Today, under conditions of a widening economic crisis, this temporary increase is being rolled back with savage consequences.

Labour's boast that it had managed to ensure that higher education was the province of all regardless of their economic position was always a vast exaggeration. Recent statistics reveal that better off and rich students remain the main beneficiaries of a university education. A government commissioned report released in January revealed that young people from the poorest fifth of the population are still much less likely to go to university than those from the richest fifth.

The research, produced by HEFCE, surveyed 8.8 million teenagers who had undertaken study since 1994. It found that 57.3 percent of children from the wealthiest backgrounds now go to university. Among the poorest teenagers in the 18-19 year-old group, just one in five (19.2 percent) now attend university—up from one in eight (12.7 percent) in the mid-1990s. Despite this slight increase in poorer children attending university, the overall gap between the richest and poorest children going to university has actually widened by one percent over the past 15 years.

Commenting on the HEFCE report, University and College (UCU) lecturers' trade union leader Sally Hunt said, "There is a massive divide between rich and poor when it comes to university education."

Whilst Hunt is able to make some critical noises about the lack of access to university from the poorest working class children, the record of the UCU in refusing to oppose the government's austerity cuts has been a critical factor in allowing this to happen.

The UCU is on record that it "fully recognises the constraints on public spending during tough economic times." In the face of the largest cuts being made to higher education in decades, the only campaign it has carried out was a "national lobby" of Parliament on January 26 attended by less than 100 people. The lobby was a cynical exercise designed to appeal to and sow illusions in the very government that has imposed the cutbacks and Conservative and Liberal Democrat opposition parties that are also pledged to an "age of austerity" and "savage cuts."

The cuts imposed by Labour have met with a favourable response in the right-wing press in Britain.

In a February 1 comment, "Labour's budget cuts will be an opportunity for our universities," the *Daily Telegraph* opined that the spending reductions would "offer universities an opportunity to re-assess their purpose."

It criticised Labour's "foolish desire to cram 50 percent of young people through university," which had "flooded higher education with too many ill-equipped students pursuing gimcrack courses that lead to qualifications that leave employers cold."

The *Telegraph* relished the fact that "The squeeze on funding (it is sure to last far longer than three years) will force many universities to cull their more feeble course offerings. Pressure on places should also push up the quality of successful applicants, no bad thing."

The cuts also made "a lifting of the cap on student fees inevitable. A market mechanism must develop between institutions and disciplines, for the current flat rate is unfair." Vocational training was the option left for the "less scholarly," the *Telegraph* argued.



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