

Over 200,000 UK students denied university places

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More than 200,000 prospective students in Britain have been denied a university place due to cuts in the higher education budget and government measures to limit numbers. This represents over a quarter of all applicants.

On September 17, the national body responsible for university admissions, UCAS, reported that it had received more than 685,000 applications, of which fewer than 450,000 had been successful. Last year, 158,000 applicants were denied a place, an increase from the 2008 figure of 120,000.

The number of applications is a 12 percent rise on 2009. Some individual universities have reported a 40 percent increase. Applications from mature applicants rose by 63 percent. Much of this increase is due to the economic crisis, with individuals hoping that gaining a degree will help them escape unemployment. Higher qualifications have become a basic necessity for many jobs paying above the minimum wage. Applications also rose because of a growing backlog of unsuccessful applications from preceding years and increasing numbers of school students gaining higher university entrance qualifications (A-Levels) than expected.

These trends have been well known for years, and there have been numerous warnings that such a crisis point was on the horizon. But instead of expanding the number of places available, the shortage has been made more acute by cuts of almost £450 million this year. These were initiated by the previous Labour government. The situation can only get rapidly worse as a result of the austerity measures being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

The vice-chancellor of Worcester University, Professor David Green, criticised the funding cuts, saying universities currently possessed the capacity to provide an additional 40,000 places. Caps introduced

by the previous Labour government limited the number of undergraduate students from Britain and the European Union, and many universities deliberately restricted student numbers in order to remain below the caps or face heavy fines. This year, for the first time, 60 universities and further-education institutions were fined £15.7 million for over-recruiting by 4,235 students.

The cuts, caps and growth in applications resulted in several universities, including half of all Scottish universities, reporting they were already full on the day A-Level results were published. This left the remaining applicants to fight for the estimated 30,000 spare places through the “clearing” process.

Those eager to gain a university place are forced to consider studying abroad or applying to new private universities in the UK in the hope of finding a place. Universities in the Netherlands, the United States and Australia are targeting British students.

Dutch universities have emphasised that their courses, typically around £1,500 a year, are half the cost charged in Britain. Housing for British students is being offered at £30 a month, including bills. However, British students will not qualify for student loans or grants.

The shift towards private universities and institutions is a significant development. The University of Buckingham, the first of Britain’s private universities, reported a 15 percent increase in inquiries from last year. Buckingham charges around £17,000 for two years of studies. One of the first acts of the new government was to approve the UK’s second private university, BPP, part of the Apollo Global group. Other private providers operating in the UK through established universities or the Open University on average charge around £8,000 a year.

Private providers are expecting an increasing role in higher education under the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition. They accept students with lower academic requirements and provide smaller classes, and there are no limits imposed on their expansion and student numbers. Spokesmen for private universities point out that, with the expected fee hikes in the state sector, there will be little disparity between their fees and state fees. The funding cuts will lead to a real shrinkage in places, exacerbating the already intense competition and leaving a vacuum for private universities to fill with the government's blessings.

Universities Minister David Willetts, an advocate of the private sector in higher education, hailed this development. He declared that extra state-subsidised places are unlikely to be created next year and no help will be forthcoming for struggling universities.

Giving a flavour of how vulnerable universities are, the *Sunday Times* reported the existence of a secret list of potentially failing universities held by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. One of those at risk—the University of Gloucestershire—has been forced to sell two campuses already and cut 100 staff. But even universities not at risk have also been forced to make cuts to staff and courses, including Manchester, which recently cut 90 undergraduate courses. In all, some 29 institutions reported a financial deficit in 2008-2009.

In response to the crisis in education, there have been the usual calls for examinations to be made tougher to select out the highest school achievers. This year's introduction of the new A* A-Level grade, which students are only awarded if they gain over 90 percent in exams, aims to satisfy such demands. Fee-paying students are three times more likely than state-educated students to achieve this grade, and the gap becomes even starker between the north and south of Britain. Universities incorporated this new grade into their entry requirements and are likely to raise entry requirements in preparation for next year's applications.

Students are being systematically squeezed out of higher education, purely on the basis of their family income and the prospect of being saddled with debts of up to £25,000. The government's review of higher-education finance, which is expected to recommend a significant raising of tuition fees, will further discourage students from applying.

The government is on a determined ideological drive to end any notion of higher education as a right. Willetts declared that those students who were unsuccessful should learn to lower their expectations and accept what they can get. The new situation offered the possibility of “maximising opportunities” by considering less-popular courses, or pursuing different alternatives—voluntary work, apprenticeships and other “vocational” employment, or students might consider starting their own business. Willetts asserted that many young people only go to university because of “decades of neglect of the vocational route” and shun other alternatives towards achieving “well-paid and fulfilling work”.

As well as chronic unemployment, youth are confronted with the prospect of low-paid, mundane and insecure employment. The possession of a degree is the only chance to find decent employment, and even then, many graduates still face unemployment and poorly paid work. The Higher Education Careers Services Unit forecasts that graduate unemployment could reach 25 percent—up from 7.5 percent last year—as a result of the government's public spending cuts. The most recent figures show that 35 percent of workers in call centres—traditionally a source of semi-skilled work—now have degrees.

Reports earlier this year pointed out that vocational training in colleges and further-education colleges have been the first victims of the spending cuts. Further education (FE) is particularly vulnerable, as many FE institutions rely on funding from universities.



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