

British government consolidates two-tier education system

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1 February 2011

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government is mounting an assault on every level of the public education system. Primary, secondary, further and higher education budgets have been slashed. University tuition fees are to be tripled by 2012. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for college and sixth-form students has been withdrawn. The expansion of state-funded, but privately managed Academy Schools portends the wholesale privatization of primary and secondary education.

The measures being enacted are consolidating the attacks made on the education system by the previous Labour government. A high quality and comprehensive education will increasingly become the preserve of the wealthy elite, as the soaring costs of further and higher education will fast become prohibitive for the vast majority of working families.

Prior to the forthcoming tuition fee hike, which will see undergraduates charged between £6,000 and £9,000 per year, the higher education teaching budget is to be cut by £300 million to £4.6 billion. In total, the teaching budget will be slashed by 80 percent by 2014-2015.

In place of this multibillion-pound hole in higher education funding, the government has cynically announced a £150 million National Scholarship Programme (NSP) to subsidise higher education for students from deprived backgrounds. Under the programme, for the few that are eligible, first-year fees are to be provided by the government, while universities that charge above £6,000 will be required to fund the second year.

The NSP will put a greater burden on already lesser-funded higher education institutions—such as polytechnical schools and newer universities—where the vast majority of poorer students attend. Nicola Dandridge of Universities UK, the representative body for university principals, complained that the programme will be a

“perverse disincentive” to institutions taking on disadvantaged students.

UCAS, the body that manages university applications, has released figures showing one in three applicants, or approximately 230,000, will miss out on a university place this year. A total of 705,500 are expected to apply for 479,000 vacancies.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Roger Brown, professor of higher education policy at Liverpool Hope University, has criticized the government’s “market-driven funding regime”, warning that “if institutions do charge different amounts, and especially if these differences are significant, this will be bound to lead to a two-tier system.”

He continues, “universities aiming to charge the maximum £9,000 ... would be requiring A* A-levels from all applicants from next year—high selectivity to justify high prices, without any educational justification.”

Brown warns that the shortage of places coupled with high demand, “may lead more universities to charge £9,000.”

A study by High Fliers Research covering the UK’s top 100 employers has revealed that 70 graduates are applying for each internship. The study found that 60 percent of employers do not plan to employ students without work experience in the field that they have studied. Ben Willmott of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, said, “Jobs are scarce and competition is fierce... Undergraduates must have relevant work experience to get the top jobs. But with few firms offering an internship wage, all but the very wealthy will be eligible for top jobs.”

Private firms are lining up to take advantage of the gutting of university funding to shape degree courses to their interest. KPMG, the professional services multinational, has announced that it will sponsor 75 accountancy positions at Durham University, to be

completed while interning with the firm. Other companies, such as GlaxoSmithKline, Harrods and Morrisons, have set up similar student programmes.

Postgraduate education will also fall victim, with funding cuts in the offing for masters degree programmes and postgraduate supervision. Les Ebdon, vice chancellor of Bedford University and head of the think-tank Million+, has warned that the cuts will “hit postgraduates particularly hard as they are not eligible for fee loans.”

Dr. Martin Gough, convener of the Society for Research into Higher Education, has voiced concerns that debt incurred from increased tuition fees will deter students with limited resources “who are not supported by their employer” from studying at postgraduate level.

Again, less prestigious universities are to bear the brunt of the cuts in postgraduate education. A recent letter from the government to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, regarding research funding, advised that universities be “selectively funded on the basis of only internationally excellent research.”

Up to half of all college and sixth-form students who depend on the EMA have had the future of their education imperiled by government plans to withdraw the allowance completely by the end of the academic year. This weekly allowance of up to £30 aids poor students with the costs of necessities such as travel, books and stationary.

A survey of 700 students, carried out by the Universities and Colleges Union, found that 70 percent of respondents thought that they would have to drop out of their course without the allowance. A survey by the Association of Colleges indicated that 94 percent of their 160 member colleges thought that the withdrawal would affect students’ ability to travel.

Chief Executive of the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Susanne Rauprich, warned, “No doubt many young people will be left behind. Scrapping EMA, imposing significant cuts to employment benefit and abandoning the Future Jobs Fund all hits the same group of young people.”

The expansion of state-funded, but privately managed Academy Schools under the governments’ education bill will leave local authorities with a £350 million shortfall. The government plans to remove £413 million from local authority education budgets over the next two years to divert to the centrally funded Academies Programme. Local authorities will save only £60 million if the scheduled 200 schools per year convert.

Gillian Hayward, chair of the Gloucestershire Schools

forum, pointed out that this shortfall and other cuts to local authorities have created a “significant financial advantage to academy conversion”, particularly in lower-funded local authorities, as they try to meet constrained budgets.

Facing a 27 percent cut in central funding by 2014-15, many local authorities are already in the process of offloading non-statutory education and youth services to private firms, while cutting others altogether.

Birmingham City Council is in the process of farming out many educational services to private firms under the guise of cooperatives. Amongst those to be privatised are music services, outdoor learning services, day and residential centres and special educational needs and behavior support services.

Wigan Council is to cut back services for special educational needs, reducing funded places from 642 to 619, and the number of resourced schools from 74 to 50. The number of children in Wigan considered to have special educational needs has risen from 8,680 to 8,740 in the past five years.

A survey by childcare charities Daycare Trust and 4Children has revealed that 250 of the 3,600 Sure Start children’s centres across England could shut over the next few years. Sure Start is a government-run agency that provides local support services and advice for parents and their children, from pregnancy through to primary education.

The survey, covering 3,500 daycare managers, found that 58 respondents thought that they would be shut within the year, and 900 said they were expecting to cut services.

Sir Aynsley-Green, the former Children’s Commissioner for England, a lobby group for children and young people, said, “We are witnessing the destruction of many of the building bricks of support for children and young people to achieve their full potential in life... and I see little in their place to inspire confidence that this generation will be looked after by government.”



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