

Oxford dons vote “no confidence” in British education policy

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Last Tuesday, lecturers at Oxford University voted overwhelmingly in support of a “no confidence” motion in the policies of David Willetts, education minister in the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.

Academics at the joint top UK university alongside Cambridge voted in favour by a massive margin of 283-5. While the dons were inside the Sheldonian Theatre debating and voting in their “congregational”, the university’s governing body, students crowded outside demanding, “David Willetts makes no sense; tutors vote no confidence!” When the vote was relayed to them there was a great deal of jubilation and cheering. The university’s council will now write to Willetts to pass on this official condemnation.

The resolution insists that Willett’s policies are “financially chaotic and unsustainable”. The treasury budgeted for an average fee of £7,500, but more than two-thirds of universities now want to charge £9,000 for some courses. Despite these higher fees, the 80 percent cut to the central government’s teaching grant leaves universities underfunded.

The resolution goes on to declare that the “academic profession in the UK has never been less attractive”, with debts being incurred as high as £87,000. Money for research is also being cut in real terms and what’s left concentrated on the government’s own short-term agenda. It criticises the setting-up of consumer-producer relationships, the licensing of for-profit institutions and the advocacy of overseas franchising by existing universities. All these measures “are designed to undermine the spirit of academic community which is at the heart of the ethos of higher education” and are a “threat to the reputation of the UK University system as a whole”.

The vote was the culmination of a month-long

campaign by the Oxford University Campaign for Higher Education, backed by 177 academics, that called on the university to “stand up and speak out” over budget cuts.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper in a report of the congregational debate, Jake, a young lecturer, gave a blistering critique of the economic logic we are “being asked to accept without challenge”. Margaret MacMillan, distinguished historian and warden of St. Anthony’s, summed-up her concerns as, “Less government money but more government control”. Paul Coones of Hertford College linked the campaign against higher education cuts with protests against National Health Service reforms and calls to save public libraries.

Kate Tunstall, Diderot scholar and a campaigner for higher education, closed the debate by declaring, “This is a big thing for Oxford to do; it’s also not just the right thing to do, but the good thing to do. Let’s take a deep breath and, in unison, in concert, hold a single, stirring note: the positive sound of the traditions and values we wish to defend”.

Academics at other universities are about to follow suit. Cambridge University is at the point of debating a similar motion and around 700 lecturers and students at Warwick University have signed a petition expressing no confidence in the universities minister.

The supporters of the petition themselves represent a coalition of disparate bourgeois and petty-bourgeois social and political tendencies, and the resolution they advanced is limited, directed at an individual instead of the entire ruling Tory-Lib/Dem coalition government clique. Nevertheless, this vote by a top university’s governing body is significant.

It shows that the drive to bring all the UK’s institutions into line with global economic

developments by the coalition is continuing to stoke dissent, even within the ruling elite's own major academic centres. These educational institutions have been the main educators of the British ruling classes for hundreds of years and many generations. When universities like Oxford pass resolutions of "no confidence" in sitting ministers, it is an expression at the top of the profound shock taking place within the entire capitalist system and society.



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