

UK students priced out of university education

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A report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) revealed that the United Kingdom is the third most expensive place in the world to acquire a degree qualification. The report, “Education at a glance”, is based on 2008 figures and does not even take into account the tripling of tuition fees in England that will take place next year.

The measures introduced by the previous Labour government have already priced many students out of education. When fees rise to £9,000 a year, a university education will become an option for an even narrower layer of the upper and upper middle class children.

According to the study, the average cost of a degree at a UK institution was £3,150 a year (nearly US\$5,000). Compared to the other 34 OECD members, students in Britain were expected to personally contribute a higher percentage of that cost—funding 65 percent of study costs, more than twice the OECD average. By contrast, state funding of education is low, with total spending on education 0.2 percent of GDP, less than in the rest of the OECD.

The only countries where higher education was more expensive were South Korea and the United States, where students could pay anything from US\$6,000 to US\$22,000 per year depending on whether they attend a public or private institution. The UK is set to become at least as elitist in its education system as these two states and possibly even worse.

The *Daily Telegraph* noted that the increase in tuition fees in 2012 “could lead to the UK topping the table in coming years.”

Between 2000 and 2008, there had been a drop in students from poorer backgrounds attending university as a result of the high costs. Whereas the OECD as a whole had an average of 82 percent of 15-to-19-year-olds in education, the level in Britain was significantly

less at only 74 percent. This can be traced directly to the increased burden placed on students to pay for their education. The percentage of fees paid personally by students doubled during this same period, from around 32 percent to 65 percent.

The figures indicate the massive levels of social inequality that have opened up in Britain over the past few decades. Other countries that compare similarly in the study are all notorious for the deep social divide between rich and poor, such as Israel, Chile, Mexico and Turkey.

The statistics are an indictment of the policies of the entire political establishment. Despite its claims to have opened up higher education to wider layers of the population, the previous Labour government oversaw a vast increase in the cost of education. It took the decision to do away with student grants and replace them with repayable loans, as well as the introduction of tuition fees of up to £3,000 in 2002.

The current Conservative-Liberal coalition has accelerated this course. The cap on university tuition fees was lifted to £9,000, with the vast majority of institutions in England expected to charge the full amount next year.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, “home” students are exempt from fees but students from elsewhere in the UK will have to pay them.

In his comments on the report, lead researcher Anders Schleicher tried to favourably contrast the system in the UK with that in the US, claiming that although it was still expensive, Britain’s financing system was more developed.

“The cost of higher education has risen very dramatically [in the US]”, he said. “It is very difficult for people to afford it because access to financing is much less well developed than in the UK.”

This assertion that financial support is “well developed” is something of a whitewash for the UK system. Bursaries are negligible in the UK. The finance system Schleicher refers to favourably is the student loan system, which currently loans out more than £3 billion every year.

These loans must be repaid with interest when a graduate begins work. There is considerable evidence that the prospect of a lifetime of debt has deterred significant numbers of young people from undertaking further study. As Schleicher observed, excessive levels of debt acted as a “difficult psychological barrier” for prospective students.

For those who do not attend higher education, prospects are increasingly bleak. The report uncovered that adults in the UK without qualifications above GCSE (exams taken at 16 years of age) were almost twice as likely to be out of a job. The rate of employment for adults without any qualifications was a full 9 percent lower than the OECD average, standing at 56 percent.

The most dishonest response to the findings came from the trade unions, which sought to strike a “left” pose in the face of government reforms. University and College Union General Secretary Sally Hunt commented that the OECD report confirmed that government policy towards education was wrong. “The Government’s university reforms are an untested experiment that are [sic] being rushed through at an alarming rate,” she said. “Overnight it is transferring the burden of funding higher education from the state to the student.”

The claim that the burden of debt is being transferred to students “overnight” is a lie, designed to absolve the Labour Party of any responsibility for the current situation. As the report clearly shows, for the past decade students have been made to bear an increasing amount of the cost to acquire a degree.

Complaints that the government’s “reforms” are “untested” and “rushed” point to the fact that the UCU does not oppose them in principle. It is concerned to secure a place at the negotiation table with government ministers and university officials to impose the measures being demanded. Although several one-day strikes have been called, at every point the union bureaucracy has sought to isolate such action by confining them to individual campuses and using

strikes as a means of pressurising the government and university management.



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