

University in UK being closed off to the working class

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This summer witnessed a mad scramble for university places in England and Wales.

Thousands of students tried desperately to secure one of a dwindling number of places, before tuition fees are hiked up to a rate that will exclude most working class students from taking a degree.

Students face £27,000 in fees from next year, £9,000 a year, a trebling of the current level. Graduate debt, accounting for accommodation and living costs, is expected to total nearly £60,000. They will also be paying Retail Price Index plus 3 percent on student loans, a commercial rate of interest greater than High Street banks, for most of their working lives. So the prospect of getting a mortgage is unlikely, let alone a good pension.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) head Mary Curnock-Cook said that this year is “the most competitive year in history” for university applications. At least 200,000 students will fail to get a place. As exam results were posted, universities were declaring they were full. Students could not find out if they had a place, as the Ucas web site crashed on results day, overwhelmed by demand.

Clearing, the system operated by Ucas to allocate remaining places, indicates that available places are at record lows. Some university clearing places were a drop of two-thirds on previous years and Imperial, Aberystwyth and Birmingham universities have opted out of clearing altogether. University College London, Edinburgh, Bristol, Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics, have never used the clearing system.

A-level passes have risen for the 29th year. Students scoring 90 percent or over in the second year of their A-levels are awarded the new A* grade, rolled out supposedly to help universities select the highest achieving students. However, figures published by Ucas show only 13 universities are using the A* grade as a measure and a significant number of top universities are refusing to acknowledge it.

King’s College London, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh,

Exeter, Lancaster, Leeds, Nottingham, Sheffield and York are not using the A* in formal admissions offers and Oxford has rejected around 12,500 candidates, many of whom are expected to gain A*s. Elite institutions have instead taken the decision to use their own criteria.

Students from working class families have made up a smaller share of places at university since the introduction of £3,000-a-year tuition charges in 2006.

In a survey of over 150 institutions last year, eight of the ten universities with the lowest proportions of working class students were in the prestigious Russell Group. With just 11.5 percent of its intake coming from working class families, Oxford is bottom in this table. Cambridge is next, with 12.6 percent, and Bristol is in third position at 14.2 percent.

The figures compare with an average working class intake of 32.3 percent across all universities in the country.

The latest data available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency of students entering full-time education in 2008-09 may not even show the true extent of the under-representation because students from long-term unemployed families are not included.

In any event, this situation is set to worsen dramatically. Given that the debt is so high and the return is so low, a university education is already an unviable prospect for many.

A quarter of graduates earn less than a person without a degree and graduate unemployment is running at a faster pace than the jobless rate. Last year marked a 15-year high, with one in five out of work and 10 percent of 2009 graduates still unemployed after 12 months. Almost 28 percent of UK graduates who left university in 2007 were still not in full-time work three and a half years later. Of 49,065 graduate responses, 21 percent were working part-time or studying, 3.5 percent were unemployed and 3.5 percent gave their response as “other”.

The Office for National Statistics figures has suggested that more than 45 students will be applying for each graduate job this year.

The Russell group are the only universities that can claim to provide degrees that are a significant asset in the jobs market. However, even students attending these universities will not have the same quality of educational experience as in previous years, as universities are bracing themselves for the biggest budget cuts since the Great Depression.

Voluntary redundancy was offered in order to ease the pressure of budget cuts in a “period of challenging external financial pressures” at Cambridge, according to Dr. Jason Scott-Warren from the university’s faculty of English. He warned, “The basic story is that students will in future be paying much more for much less.”

Almost a fifth of undergraduates in England were not satisfied with their degree course in 2010, according to the National Student Survey. Four in ten students criticised the level of feedback on coursework from tutors and lecturers, unsurprising as universities axed courses and increased class sizes. Close to £1 billion has already been cut from the funding of English universities. According to the University College Union, £6 billion will be cut from the teaching budget by 2014.

With the majority of universities opting for the maximum £9,000 fee, which has to be paid up front through student loans (financed by government), an additional funding gap of more than £1 billion could open up.

Even the Russell Group is not immune. The increased fees of £9,000 per year per student do not even approach covering the shortfall in funds. To maintain the current level, let alone increase academic performance, they will push for a further increase of fees that will make the already slim chance of a quality education for working class students a thing of the past. That door will be firmly shut. These institutions will be the sole reserve of the sons and daughters of the ruling class.

No alternative route to higher education is offered to youth from the working class and lower middle class.

Instead, disappointed A-level candidates with good grades are being urged to apply to university again next year, despite the rise in fees. Curnock-Cook, Ucas chief executive, said: “Those people who have good grades and for whatever reason haven’t got an offer, it is absolutely the right thing to do to apply next year with the grades in your pocket. You don’t have the agonising wait till August. You will have an unconditional offer, which you may well have before Christmas.”

Even if students took up this offer, it would only mean fewer places available for next year’s school leavers.

The Labour Party—conveniently forgetting that its mantra under the leadership of former prime minister Tony Blair that “Education, Education, Education” was the path to social advancement in their new “meritocracy”—now advises

young workers not to go to university. In light of the fact that this year is predicted to be the last time a working class child will likely have the benefit of a university education, Shadow Education Secretary Andy Burnham said it was now time to “raise the status of the non-university route”.

Study in Scotland was for a time seen as a way of minimising the cost of student fees. It operates a discriminatory policy, where Scottish and European Union students are exempt from fees, whereas students from the rest of the UK have to pay. However, the charge was around £1,800 per year to study in Scotland.

From next year, Scottish fees look set to rise to at least the £27,000 English figure. Aberdeen has set £9,000 per term, pledging not to charge for the fourth year of tuition that is the norm for a Scottish degree, as opposed to three years in the rest of the UK. Even this minimal restraint was not demonstrated by Edinburgh, where a four-year degree will cost £36,000. A five-year degree at its school of medicine will cost £45,000.

Bordering on satire, a professor at the University of Dundee, Sue Rabbitt Roff, has suggested that students could sell their kidney for up to £28,000 to help clear their debts!

Writing in the *British Medical Journal* that the current ban on selling organs should be overturned, Roff commented: “One reservation that many people express about such a proposal is that it might exploit poor people in the same way the illegal market does now. But if the standard payment were equivalent to the average annual income in the UK, currently about £28,000, it would be an incentive across most income levels for those who wanted to do a kind deed and make enough money to, for instance, pay off university loans.”

The prospect of a university education is bleak indeed, unless you are prepared to become a living body-bank of spare parts for sale to the highest bidder.



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