Sharp fall in number of UK university students

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The number of students applying for universities in the UK has dropped by 8.9 percent compared to last year. The decline is a direct result of the tripling of tuition fees to £9,000 for students beginning their studies this autumn.

The latest figures come from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).

Tuition fees of £1,000 a year were first introduced in 1998 by the Labour government and raised again to £3,000 a year in 2004. Within weeks of coming to power in May 2010, the Liberal Democrats jettisoned their electoral pledge to oppose fee increases and, along with their Conservative coalition partners, raised them to £9,000. The increase provoked widespread protests by youth and students in the UK, which developed largely out of the control of the National Union of Students (NUS).

The NUS condemned protestors who faced violence from the police and witch-hunts by politicians and the media.

Government claims that only a handful of universities would charge over £7,500 were quickly exposed as lies as one by one most universities announced plans to charge the full amount.

A comparison of figures according to region in the UK reveals a clear link between falling applications and the fee rise. Applications from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland fell by 4.5 percent, 2.7 percent and 2.2 percent respectively. Wales subsidises students above £3,465 as does Northern Ireland for students studying in the region. Students who have been living in Scotland for three years or more are exempt from fees. In contrast, applications from England fell by about 10 percent, a decline of some 46,000 students, and from the by European Union by 11 percent. Applications from older students, including people made redundant and seeking to retrain, have taken the greatest battering, falling by 15-20 percent.

A survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research found that tuition fees and overall costs associated with studying for three years are the biggest concerns putting youth off from applying.

Universities Minister David Willetts dismissed such concerns by claiming that the 618,000 applications this year marked the second highest on record. There was still “very strong demand,” he said.

Willetts insisted costs should not be a barrier and that the new repayment terms were fairer—students will not have to start repaying their loans until they start earning more than £21,000. He seized on figures that show the decline in applications from the most disadvantaged youth was less than amongst those from more wealthy backgrounds, which he claimed was “encouraging”.

Such comments are entirely cynical. However it is portrayed, there is nothing “fairer” in imposing a burden of debt on new graduates--particularly as the fee rises are due to the clawing of billions from the working population to finance the bailout of the banks.

New graduates can now expect to have a debt in excess of £50,000 after living costs are taken into account. Interest for this enormous sum will be linked to the higher rate of inflation plus 3 percent, and the repayment period will be extended to 30 years—covering most of a graduate’s working life. It is estimated that a new graduate will be paying an effective tax rate of 41 percent.

That prospective students are willing to shoulder this burden is explained by the conditions facing most youth, which make a degree a necessity to gain decent employment.

Youth unemployment (16-24) in the UK remains around 20 percent, comprising over one million young

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people. Official figures show that 14 percent of graduates are without a job, compared to 28 percent for non-graduates. The average hourly wage for a graduate is £15.18, but this includes very high earners in medical and other professions. In the last six years, 36 percent of graduates have found themselves having to take low or unskilled jobs.

A report by the Intergenerational Foundation warns that the astronomical growth in student debt is unsustainable and the current repayment terms could be made harsher still. A clause in the conditions for repayment states that students agree to take out their loans in line with "regulations that apply at the time the repayments are due *and as they are amended*. The regulations may be replaced by later regulations." [Emphasis in the original].

The think-tank Demos, which has its origins in the Communist Party of Great Britain and was associated with New Labour, has already called for harsher terms in its own report on tuition fees.

Higher fees are combined with a raft of other regressive measures barring increasing numbers from entering higher education. Last year saw about a third of applicants—210,000—denied a place. Universities have so far been reluctant to accept as many students as last year because of uncertainty over how many students they can take and fears of being fined £14,000 for each student they over-recruit.

The number of students from poorer backgrounds could also be reduced because of new rules relating to the examination results needed to qualify for a university place. The system allows universities to accept an unlimited number of students achieving grades of AAB or higher in three A-Levels. This means the more selective universities will be able to expand to the detriment of the less selective, which is likely to be made worst next year as the threshold is lowered to ABB.

New guidelines state that certain vocational BTEC qualifications will not count towards the unlimited number of AAB students that can be accepted, despite being equivalent. BTECs are more likely to be taken by lower-income students.

In addition to the AAB system, the core-margin system reserves 20,000 spaces for further education colleges that can award degrees and charge less than £7,500 a year. This system is an attempt to see cheaper further education colleges take over the provision of higher education, confining a greater number of poorer students to less prestigious and more poorly-funded institutions. Statistics show graduates face different chances in the future based on the institution they attended.

Part of the reason for most universities charging the full £9,000 fee is the £830 million cut from the higher education budget for universities. There are warnings by the Higher Education Policy Institute that the government will now be tempted to cut the higher education budget further over the next few years.

These changes will mean that some universities facing tight finances and falling student numbers will have to drastically restructure and slash staff costs or face bankruptcy.

One of Willetts' main aims in carving up the higher education system is to encourage the growth of private providers. BPP, one of two private universities in the UK, is believed to be charging £5,000 to £6,000 a year and has reported a doubling of applications. New rules now allow students to take out tuition loans of up to £6,000 to attend private institutions.

The general tendency is towards fewer student numbers and a two-tier higher education system determined by wealth.

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