

Court decision allows some London Metropolitan international students to remain in UK

Jordan Shilton
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London Metropolitan University (LMU) has been granted the right to continue to offer courses to international students who are currently enrolled at the institution, the High Court has ruled. The September 21 decision came in response to moves by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to revoke the university's licence to recruit and teach students from outside the European Union (EU).

Uncertainty still remains over the fate of many of the 2,600 students affected by the August 29 decision. The court ruling permits students to remain until they have finished their current year of study or their course, whichever is reached first. Students in their first or second year could thus still be left with no qualifications although they have paid tens of thousands of pounds in fees. This limited reprieve was offered only to students already in the UK, who were deemed to have "full proper immigration status."

The court also ruled that a judicial review would take place, in order to determine whether London Metropolitan should have its licence reinstated.

The uncertainty has thrown the lives of many hundreds of students into crisis. As one student, Abhimanyu Agrawal from India, commented prior to the latest court ruling, "I am shocked and feel let down by the university. This withdrawal of licence has put our careers, jobs, life, money and everything else at stake."

The original move by the UKBA is inseparable from the broader policy within the Conservative-Liberal coalition government to whip up an anti-immigrant atmosphere in Britain. Last weekend, UKBA announced the launch of a "national allegations database," a system allowing members of the public to

report individuals they suspect of being "illegal immigrants." According to the *Daily Telegraph*, UKBA was anticipating around 20,000 such allegations every three months.

Prime Minister David Cameron has made increasingly bellicose threats against immigrants, pledging to slash the rate of net migration from its current level of around 200,000 annually to "tens of thousands" by 2015. Last year, he called upon members of the public to support the government to "reclaim our borders."

True to form, right-wing think tanks and the media have seized upon the events at LMU to call for a strict clampdown on the numbers allowed into the UK.

Typical was a report from the "Migrant Watch" organisation, which asserted that only 5 percent of all international students went to so-called "top" universities. Sir Andrew Green, chairman of Migrant Watch, stated, "It is time that the strong public interest in immigration control was properly balanced against the self-serving pleading of the universities lobby in the UK which is in denial about the potential impact of foreign students on net migration."

Students who come to the UK to study are in reality confronted with numerous bureaucratic regulations they must comply with or face having their right to remain in the UK revoked. Non-EU students are forced to register with the police within seven days of arrival, a procedure which has resulted in long queues at police stations overnight.

The BBC reported this week that at one police station in London, students were beginning to queue at midnight to await the opening of the office the next morning. Confirming that this was by no means

unheard of, the BBC cited a statement from the police which commented blandly that such events were “usual for September and October” as universities re-open.

Universities are compelled to act as an arm of the state by enforcing immigration controls. Students must report to a faculty office at least once every two weeks to confirm their whereabouts, and absences from classes can result in the threat of visas being terminated. Travel beyond their immediate area of study is strictly limited, with journeys to other parts of the UK confined to a short period of time. After completing their studies, students are only permitted to remain in Britain on their visas for a further four months.

As well as attempts to stir up anti-immigrant sentiment, criticism from anonymous sources appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* that LMU had taken on students without the necessary qualifications to study at a higher education level.

In remarks to the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, Warwick University Professor Susan Bassnett asserted that she had “seen scripts in English so poor that they wouldn’t scrape a GCSE.”

The fact that universities increasingly rely on higher tuition fees to raise funds is no secret. Figures for last year suggest that the fees paid by international students of £2.7 billion accounted for more than 10 percent of total university revenue. This is a state of affairs for which the policies of consecutive Labour and Conservative-Liberal governments, not students themselves, are responsible. There has been a systematic assault on public funding for education at all levels, including for universities and colleges. The resulting funding crisis confronting many institutions is now used as an excuse for the raising of tuition fees, both for British students as well as those from other countries.

Tuition fees for British students attending university rose this year from £3,000 to £9,000 annually. There was a corresponding fall in university applications of over 8 percent, a reflection of the fact that for many young people obtaining a higher education qualification is now unaffordable.

The increased costs have been accompanied by cuts to courses and teaching provision across the board, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs.

No campaign has been organised by the National

Union of Students (NUS) to defend the right of the threatened students to study and live in the UK, as a right. Their only disagreement is over the expediency of allowing non-EU students to study in the UK from the point of view of economic concerns. According to this argument, clamping down on the number of students allowed in to the UK each year will hinder the ability of British universities to raise funds, which are boosted by the high tuition fees they charge international students.

The NUS has launched a petition drive aimed at pressuring the government to intervene and change its decision on LMU. Its petition complains that international students are being used as a “political football” and that the latest measures “could have implications for the UK economy.”

It continues, “International students constitute an industry worth £12.5 billion a year to the British economy, and contribute a great deal to our education system and society. It would be extremely misguided to take this for granted. We call on the Government to support this call for international students to be taken out of migration statistics.”

This is a call which has been backed by sections of the political and business establishment, as well as university chancellors. Far from any concern with the fate of the students involved, the priority of such a campaign is to ensure that institutions are able to cash in on uncapped tuition fees for international students, and to express concern over the danger posed to both the “competitiveness” of British universities against their international rivals and the economy more generally.



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