

# Top UK universities call for cuts to funding for poorer students

Joan Smith and Paul Mitchell  
30 May 2013

According to the *Times*, vice-chancellors at Britain's Russell group of 24 top research universities are "privately urging" government ministers to cut funding used to support poorer students.

Almost £4 billion of public spending currently goes toward providing maintenance grants and student loan subsidies. There is also "opportunity" funding to encourage poorer students to attend university.

The vice-chancellors claim it is necessary to slash the student support budget to protect scientific research funding from cuts in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's next spending review on June 23. Although the £4.6 billion science budget has been left largely untouched, reports suggest both it and other areas of ring-fenced public spending, including schools and overseas aid, may now be targeted.

The call by the vice-chancellors is a narrow, elitist response to the dog-eat-dog atmosphere that has been encouraged as a result of the marketisation and privatisation of university education and the withdrawal of public funding. The Russell group universities have a much higher proportion of wealthier, privately educated students who do not receive grants than the newer universities and carry out most of the scientific research.

The newer universities are resisting the Russell group proposals and say they will have to raise tuition fees from the current average of £7,500 to the maximum £9,000, which nearly all Russell group universities already charge.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has already released its funding allocations for the next academic year, slashing the budget of 129 universities and 203 further education colleges by over 15 percent from £5.3 billion to £4.5 billion. The

teaching grant is hardest hit, with a £900 million cut from £2.3 billion.

Over the last two years a total of £1.6 billion has been cut from the budget, forcing universities to rely further on student fees to fund courses. These cuts are leading to job losses and department closures as universities struggle to remain functional. In 2012 the number of students applying for universities in the UK dropped by 8.9 percent compared to the previous year—the direct result of the tripling of tuition fees to £9,000. This year has already seen a 40 percent drop in applications from mature students.

The case of Durham University, not part of the Russell group, exemplifies the impact of the cuts imposed since the last spending review in 2010 and the rapid move from grant to tuition fee income. Funding for teaching at Durham will be cut by more than half from £39 million in 2012 to under £19 million this year. The university says cuts in teaching funding imposed last year forced it to raise its fees to the maximum £9,000.

The pressure on non-Russell group universities is also being increased by the lifting of the limits on degree places for students who achieve ABB grades or above at A level. Until this year, supposedly to increase "social mobility", there was a cap on the number of students with the top grades each university could take. Now the cap has been removed the more prestigious institutes will be able to increase the number of highly qualified students.

At the same time, Regent's College in London has become the second private university in the country. The institution was given degree-awarding powers last year and will charge students up to £15,000 a year for its full-time undergraduate courses and close to £19,000 for its post-graduate courses. British students

can take up to £6,000 as a tuition loan from the government to attend a private university.

The granting of university status to private institutions is clearing the way for for-profit institutions headed by equity firms to gain access to publicly funded tuition loans and create a huge market similar to that involving sub-prime mortgages.

According to Andrew McGettigan in his new book *The Great University Gamble, Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, “We should expect a diminution in the number of universities in England, whether through merger or collapse, and prospective students are likely to soon face less choice as to where and what they study.”

He explains that the higher education system is “on the cusp of a transformation” and draws comparisons to the situation 20 years ago in football when “the breakaway Premier League and Sky TV money combined with the regulatory arbitrage of corporate restructuring to reroute the financial circuits of the game.”

A new elite will “cement its position” in higher education, whilst the rest will be “left to scrap in a new market swamped with cheap degree providers,” he predicts.

“The traditional multipurpose university with a combination of a range of degrees and a modestly effective research programme has had its day,” Sir Michael Barber, Chief educational advisor for Pearson, wrote in his report, *An Avalanche is Coming*, before warning that only the most prestigious universities will survive the onslaught from private providers.

Barber gives voice to the interests of the financial aristocracy, whose agenda in higher education is to strangle public funding and complete the transformation of universities into corporate-controlled institutions that tailor courses to the needs of business. The range of courses will be reduced as subjects cheaper and more profitable to teach edge out more specialised subjects, particularly in the arts and humanities. Student numbers will decline and a two-tier higher education system determined by wealth will be entrenched.

None of this has been seriously opposed by the education trade unions, who have shown their willingness to see jobs go and wages and conditions transformed as long as management involves them in

negotiations, or the National Union of Students. Ex-left organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party do everything possible to subordinate students and staff to the unions and the NUS through impotent protest politics.

At Sussex University, a series of demonstrations and an eight-week-long student occupation—eventually broken up by police—were organised by the pseudo-left to cover for the refusal of the unions to mobilise against plans to outsource 235 estates and catering jobs announced in May last year. Only after these attacks had largely been pushed through did Unison, Unite and the University and College Union decide to consult their members about whether “they would in principle be prepared to take industrial action”—but only over “the university’s failure to properly consult over its plans.”



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**