Right of international students to study in UK under attack

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International students studying at British universities face increasingly precarious conditions, including the threat of deportation.

They are being stigmatised by fear-mongering stories in the media as part of a broader campaign of anti-immigrant scapegoating.

Laws require non-European Union (EU) students applying to study in Britain to gain sponsorship, under strict conditions, from a university or college with a government license. Universities must report to the UK Border Agency (UKBA). There has been a 20-fold increase in the number of reports since the legislation was introduced in 2009, reaching 100,000 last academic year according to figures obtained using Freedom of Information requests.

The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* distorted these statistics to accuse overseas students of widespread abuse of the immigration system. It raised the fact that many organisations have been forced to register multiple colleges in the same building to avoid losing their licenses to sponsor international students, called "highly trusted status". Over 800 institutions have faced this penalty during the past three years.

Colleges sidestep the regulations by transferring their students to a "partner college" on the same site with the same staff. Ravinder Kumar, who runs four colleges in the same building, said, "The UKBA rules are ridiculous. They took the licence because we hadn't reported to them when our students weren't attending classes."

The *Telegraph* had to admit in the same article that of the 189,000 reports to the UKBA, most merely registered a change in student circumstances or informed of dropped courses. This is far from the claimed "surge" of immigrants "entering Britain illegally."

This follows UKBA deportation threats issued to 2,600 non-EU students last August, when London Metropolitan University had its "trusted status" removed.

The use of educational institutions as agents of the immigration service follows instructions for them to monitor political activity such as Islamic groups, including recent calls by Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May for fresh attacks on freedom of speech on campuses.

Media attacks against international students grew following reports of £50 million of unpaid student loans given to EU graduates of British universities by the government's Student Loans Company (SLC.) The SLC recently hired private investigators to locate graduates.

Labour Party MP Frank Field attacked EU students as parasites, claiming they had "turned the loans system into a grants system"—despite the fact that foreign students contribute approximately £12.5 billion to the UK economy annually. Many cities are increasingly dependent on this money, such as Sheffield, which benefits by £120 million annually from the city's 8,000 international students, according to research conducted by Oxford Economics.

The *Telegraph* also claimed that foreign students require lower grades to be accepted on British university courses than native students. This fabrication was dispelled by research conducted by *Times Higher Education*, which found that UK students typically have fewer UCAS points than their international counterparts.

Punitive legislation and media rhetoric is deterring international students from studying in Britain. Since April, increasing numbers of international applicants have been interviewed by immigration officials,

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extending the UKBA trial interviews of 100,000 candidates carried out last year. May said, “I believe this new approach will help us to root out the abuse of British visas and improve the integrity of our immigration system.”

As a result, over 250,000 applicants may face UKBA interview this year.

The number of student visas issued last year fell by a quarter and the total number of international applications has fallen for the first time in 16 years, according to a report published in January by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. There has been a 23 percent drop in the number of Indian students studying in the UK in recent years, unlike countries such as the United States and Australia, where numbers are increasing rapidly.

Two government ministers toured South America this spring seeking to attract more potential students. The problem has also spurred university vice chancellors to publicly criticize the government. They seek to attract overseas students because they typically pay over £15,000 per year in tuition fees, increasing to £22,000 for science-based courses.

The university system, which is facing large budget cuts, is reliant on this income that has doubled during the past decade. In 2012, international students contributed more than a tenth of the £23 billion total income of English universities.

This year’s Queen’s Speech, in addition to proclaiming continued attacks on the welfare state, announced a new immigration bill that may threaten overseas students’ access to public services such as the National Health Service. EU and non-EU students may have to buy private health insurance or pay an “NHS bond” before arriving in Britain.

These attacks on international students are part of the wider anti-immigrant campaign waged by the ruling class to divide the working class along national lines. Its aim is to divert into reactionary channels the social opposition of workers suffering under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s unprecedented austerity regime.

The National Union of Students (NUS) international students’ officer Daniel Stevens criticised the government for “sending the message loud and clear that international students are not welcome in the UK” by treating them with “suspicion and hostility.” However, the NUS refused to lift a finger to defend persecuted foreign students at London Metropolitan University last autumn, only criticising the threatened deportations because of the economic damage they would cause.

This followed a toothless campaign earlier last year against the changes to student visas reducing the allowed period for students to find work after graduation. Ultimately, the NUS seeks only to bolster the international competitiveness of the UK education industry. It refuses to stand for the common interests of students internationally. To oppose the financial burden placed on overseas students would require a serious struggle against tuition fees and other financial barriers to education facing working class youth in Britain.

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