

British government cuts funding for poorest university students

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Last week, the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition government sent the annual letter to the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) demanding cuts of £125 million.

The cuts will hit the poorest university students hardest.

The Access to Learning Fund (ALF), which makes non-repayable grants to the poorest students to enable them to access and remain in higher education, will be scrapped. The fund was set up by the Labour government in 2004 to deflect criticism to it raising tuition fees from £1,000 to £3,000 a year—fees that have since trebled to nearly £9,000.

The latest cuts come on top of plans announced last year to slash the National Scholarship Programme from £150 million to £50 million in 2015-16.

The scrapping of ALF was a fallback position for the government after reports suggested it was proposing to slash the £332 million Student Opportunity Fund, which universities receive based on the number of poor or disadvantaged students they take on. Those plans enraged several University Vice Chancellors, including Michael Gunn (Staffordshire University) and Dominic Shellard (De Montfort University).

Vice chancellors are hardly the usual opponents of government policy and enjoyed an average pay increase of 8.1 percent last year, while teaching and support staff are expected to get a mere 1 percent increase. Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills Vince Cable and Minister of State for Universities and Science David Willetts used this large increase as a pretext for the cuts, demanding that the vice chancellors who are enjoying an “upward drift in salaries” should exercise “greater restraint”.

To imply that vice chancellors are the cause of the financial problems facing universities is of course a self-

serving lie by the two ministers. Willetts, who has an estimated £1.9 million net worth, and Cable, whose party—the Liberal Democrats—reneged on its hollow election promise to not make any further increases to student fees, both serve the interests of a financial oligarchy whose interests do not lie with increased social participation in higher education.

University application figures in 2013 dropped to their lowest since 2009, with research highlighting the trebling of tuition fees to £9,000 as the main cause. The latest figures for 2014 show a 4 percent increase prior to the latest rounds of cuts.

When the plans to cut the Student Opportunity Fund were first rumoured, the National Union of Students (NUS) initiated a feeble twitter campaign using the hashtag #SaveStudentOpportunities. The focus of the campaign was on getting the support of vice chancellors and appeals, via a “photo campaign,” to the government to make less excessive cuts. NUS President Tony Pearce declared, “Cutting the Student Opportunity Fund is an absolute disgrace and, in the wake of cuts to the National Scholarship Programme, looks like the Government is backtracking on its commitment to support social mobility in favour of balancing the books on the backs of the poor.”

In 2008, the NUS abandoned its formal demand for “free education.” Then NUS President Wes Streeting stated that “just shouting for ‘free education’ will not work.”

This move, at the beginning of the global economic crisis, was further proof that the NUS had no interest in defending the right to free education, but was complicit in the move to remove opposition to the concept of universities as centres of business. The same year, the NUS constitution was amended to turn the NUS from a recognised campaigning body to that of a charity with

the number of representatives greatly reduced.

Having abandoned the campaign for free education the NUS, in 2009, proposed a “graduate tax” scheme that was linked to the income a student went on to earn after leaving university. Thus the NUS was proposing to bring in a form of means testing in education that successive governments have sought to impose in other areas of formerly free public services.

Since then, while paying lip-service to protecting the interests of the students, it has moved to disarm the student body at every opportunity, refusing to make a stand and viciously denouncing students who have run into trouble during protests. The NUS is nothing more than an appendage of university management and the government. In July 2013, when Willetts was proposing to involve the NUS in the regulation and control of university funding with the HEFCE, he declared that that while in the past the Conservatives considered the NUS a “bunch of Marxists plotting [world] revolution” they were now a “crucial ally”.

Since the publication of the government’s letter to HEFCE, the NUS have attempted to portray the £125 million cuts as a victory. NUS Vice-President for Higher Education Rachel Wenstone declared, “It is a testament to the hard work of student’s unions that we were able to stop the proposed £350 million cut to the Student Opportunity Fund”, which had led to “in-fighting in the coalition government”.

The pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, have played their part. While issuing the ritual denunciations of the NUS for turning away from the fight for free education, they continue to insist there is no alternative but to keep up the “pressure” on it. They make no attempt to make a principled break away from this bankrupt organisation, because many of their own members fill the NUS hierarchy.

Only the independent mobilisation of youth, students and workers around the principles of socialism will save education from becoming nothing more than a business enterprise, where only those from the wealthiest backgrounds can partake.



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