

Students sue British government over ban on loans and grants

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Romanian and Bulgarian students are taking the British government to court over its decision to end financial support while they study in the UK.

“It appears these students are being discriminated against for political reasons,” said Holborn Chambers barrister Stuart Stevens last week, whose law firm is representing some of the students affected.

Last November, Universities and Science Minister David Willetts announced the ban in the midst of a chauvinist press campaign claiming that east European “beggars and benefits cheats” would swamp Britain after EU controls on Romania and Bulgaria were lifted on January 1.

Willetts claimed the ban was in response to an unexpected £1.4 billion deficit that had been discovered in the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) budget. He noted that there had been a surge of university applications from Bulgarian and Romanian nationals.

Taking their cue, the media then sought to whip up hysteria over “suspicious claims.” The government has used the witch-hunting atmosphere to introduce other restrictions on immigrants claiming jobless benefits, accessing health care or renting somewhere to live.

Students were given no warning about what was to happen. In January, letters from Student Finance England (SFE) arrived to inform them that their loans had been stopped. They were told they would not be reinstated until they had supplied additional information proving they had been “ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom throughout the three-year period preceding the first day of the first academic year of the course....”

The 7,500 Bulgarian and Romanian students have to provide three years of bank statements and utility bills in order to have their loans reinstated. This means that

students younger than 19 who were living with family prior to university may lose their college place simply because they have no such evidence.

Ginka Guncheva, 21, who has lived in the UK for more than six years, told *Arts London News* that the additional evidence she sent to SFE showing she attended secondary school in the country was declared insufficient. “The difficulty for most students is to find this evidence from the years when they were under 16,” Guncheva said.

“We didn’t have work documents or a bank account. I sent them bank statements from 2009 but they want them from 2008, when I was 15 and didn’t have an account.”

Guncheva has been removed from the computer systems at Westminster University where she is in her last year and forced to give up her studies. “I commute to London so I didn’t have any money to attend lectures or tutorials. When I tried to submit my coursework I was not on the system, everything was frozen,” she explained.

Contrary to the British government’s and the media’s claims, the increase in applications from Romanian and Bulgarian students was neither suspicious nor unpredictable. It was the direct result of a new government policy introduced in August 2012 that allowed all EU students access to the loan scheme.

Under the scheme, graduates do not have to repay the loan until they earn £21,000 a year. Naturally, thousands of Bulgarians and Romanians who had enrolled on UK courses, many of whom were struggling to pay their fees and deal with the cost of living, applied.

The real cause of the crisis in the student loan scheme is the unrelenting attacks on British workers at the hands of both the previous Labour government and the

current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

Willetts admitted as much recently, telling MPs that the number of students repaying their loans was much fewer than expected because wages had failed to increase. As a result, the figure for the number of students not earning enough to start repaying their loans—that is, earning more than £21,000—has risen from the estimated 28 percent when the scheme was first launched to nearly 40 percent.

The government's answer to the funding crisis is to propose lowering the repayment threshold to £18,000 a year, while offloading the estimated £40 billion student loan debt to the private sector, in the hope it will be able to extract more money out of students.

Following the attack on Romanian and Bulgarian students, the National Union of Students (NUS) posted a perfunctory article on its web site in December repeating the procedure students had to follow. NUS international students officer Daniel Stevens meekly commented, "The lack of communication from the Government to affected students is unacceptable. This situation is disrupting people's lives and has inevitably led to much confusion. The Government needs to take this situation seriously."

The refusal of the NUS to launch a campaign in defence of the Romanian and Bulgarian students is of a piece with its response to all of the attacks launched on students. Dominated by the Labour Party, it has no fundamental differences with the government. It was the Labour government of Tony Blair that introduced tuition fees and replaced student grants with loans in 1998. A few years later, fees were increased to £3,000 and discussions began on further increases before the Gordon Brown Labour government lost power in 2010. As a result, student debt levels rose sharply.



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