

UK White Paper escalates privatisation of higher education

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Britain's Conservative government is pushing through major attacks on universities as part of the drive to privatize the entire education system.

The attacks were part of the Queen's Speech announcing Tory plans "to support the establishment of new universities and to promote choice and competition across the higher education sector." They are contained in a White Paper detailing changes to the higher education (HE) system that, if enacted into law, would fundamentally change the social role of universities and allow private institutions to be given university status.

The main proposals are further counter-reforms that remove any remaining barriers to profit making and facilitate the establishment of private universities. New, for-profit institutions will be able award degrees immediately and earn university status after three years of operation, benefiting numerous niche private institutions.

The White Paper, "Success as a Knowledge Economy," denies support to the many universities that struggle financially and explicitly rejects bailouts. If struggling, they would face course closures or complete collapse, creating a gap in the market for new colleges. The new universities are given a license to exploit the lucrative "education export market" with courses, mainly in business and high-paying professions, targeting overseas students who pay astronomical fees averaging £12,000 per year and reaching £36,600 for medicine courses.

The government claims the reforms will improve the accessibility and "relevance" of universities. Background notes to the Queen's Speech boasted of "the biggest supply-side reforms to the higher education sector for a quarter of a century, so that we open more universities and give more young people—from all backgrounds—the chance to succeed." In reality, it increases the subordination of the HE system to a growing "market" in education, with institutions competing against one other. Far from increasing access to education for all, this can

only decrease it and exacerbate social inequality.

The second plank of the paper breaks the link between teaching and research. Under the banner of "diversity," the HE system will reflect entrenched social inequality, with a range of institutions charging different amounts according to market rates. This will further the proliferation of low-status, teaching-only institutions catering to working class youth while a core of elite universities monopolise scarce research funding. Newly founded universities will offer cut-price courses with shorter duration and lower educational standards, while the rich buy their children a world-class education.

Research resources are to be further subordinated to business interests, with increased focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. The government's agenda is revealed by the appointment of John Kingman, a former treasury secretary and banker, to run the new unified research funding body "intended to improve Britain's record of turning knowledge into cash."

The changes will worsen students' financial burden and education quality.

The Tories' planned Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is effectively a league table that will intensify competition and encourage the commodification of education. Universities that fulfil "teaching quality" criteria will be allowed to increase tuition fees to keep up with inflation, which will mean £10,000 in standard annual fees within the decade. Various existing fee caps will be lifted, enabling more institutions to charge the present full figure of £9,000 per year. The TEF will become a mechanism to increase academics' teaching workload.

The Tories' claims that the measures are aimed at increasing social mobility are exposed by the fact that the universities most likely to fail are former-polytechnics in poor areas that teach the most youth from disadvantaged

backgrounds. Graduates typically pursue lower-paid jobs in health care and public services. Prior to its latest raft of attacks, the government abolished maintenance grants that assisted with the living expenses of the poorest students.

The number of mature and part-time students has also fallen rapidly.

The HE proposals will cement Britain's status as the country with the most corporate-dominated education system, with lower HE spending than any other developed country. Britain now has the world's highest levels of student debt and worst bursaries provision, according to the "Degrees of Debt" study by the educational charity Sutton Trust, which concluded:

"The typical English student faces debts of over £44,000 at graduation. Even compared with graduates of US private for-profit universities (who graduate with about £29,000 of debt), estimates suggest that English students fare worst."

Funding constraints have tightened since the 2010 tripling of tuition fees and associated cuts by the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, forcing universities to rely on fees and placing the financial burden onto the backs of students. The impact on teaching quality was confirmed by a recent leaked government memo admitting universities "do not offer the quality and intensity of teaching we expect for 9k."

HE is being transformed into a competitive market by spending cuts, sky-high fees and the rapid proliferation of private universities. Hundreds of private institutions are now able to adopt the prestigious "university" title, award official degrees and issue state-backed student loans. Market competition has intensified since the lifting of the student number cap, with the number of students at private universities up tenfold during the last parliament.

The White Paper is central to the ruling elite's aim of privatising all education provision, initiated under the 1997-2010 Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Labour opened the door to privatization by introducing tuition fees in 1999 and introducing the first private university in 2010.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn verbally opposed the fee hike and launched a petition, stating, "I want to make it clear to the prime minister [David Cameron] that he will not get any support from these benches on raising tuition fees."

However, Corbyn is supine in the face of the Tory government's drive to convert primary and secondary schools to privately run academies. Labour, under his leadership, scrapped his pledges to remove fees and

reinstate grants, with a member of his shadow cabinet stating these would not "automatically become policy."

The Labour and union bureaucracy have aligned themselves with the core of the Tory agenda, despite limited policy differences. Jonathan Clifton of the Labour-linked Institute for Public Policy Research openly supported the measures, stating, "The government is right to allow new providers into the higher education system, but it must manage the process carefully."

University College Union (UCU) General Secretary Sally Hunt said of the White Paper, "Despite repeated warnings from UCU about the danger of opening up UK higher education to private, for-profit providers, the government is setting out on a clear course to privatise higher education."

She did not oppose the Tories agenda in principle, stating instead that, based on international experience of such proposals, including in the US, "lessons must be learned and rigorous quality measures applied before any new provider is allowed to access either degree awarding powers or state funding."

The UCU and other academic unions, despite professing opposition to attacks on further and higher education, have a record of capitulation to cuts and job losses spanning more than a decade.

The National Union of Students (NUS) verbally opposed the tuition increase, with its president Malia Bouattia stating it will be "fighting with all its strength to demand it ditches this disastrous plan."

This same organisation systematically demobilised student opposition to the introduction of tuition fees. Accepting their subsequent hiking, the NUS then threw out its pledge to "oppose further rises in tuition fees." It did not lift a finger to prevent the maintenance grant cuts.

Students and youth must mount an independent political struggle, turning to the working class as the only social force that can defend education and prevent the dismantling of gains made over generations of class struggle. This is the standpoint advanced by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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