

New legislation gives private sector further access to higher education in Britain

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The Conservative government's Higher Education and Research Bill is reaching its final stages in the House of Lords. The Bill, introduced in the House of Commons by Conservative government Education Minister Justine Greening last May—and set to pass into law within the next few months—represents a massive attack on university education.

According to the Department of Education, the Bill's purpose is to drive up standards, increase choice for students and protect academic freedom.

The reality is the opposite.

The “choice” referred to is in fact a euphemism for the introduction of measures designed to lower the requirements that educational institutions must satisfy in order to attain university status. The aim is to further open up the higher education “market” to “alternative providers”—that is, private institutions. This is touted by the government as the means of increasing competition between universities and thereby improving student choice and educational standards.

Far from driving up the quality of university tuition, this proposal will hasten the privatisation of education via a competitive “educational market,” changing the relationship between universities and students into that of supplier and consumer. Institutions will come to focus on their business interests, rather than on research and educational excellence.

Two newly outlined central bodies, the “Office for Students” and “UK Research and Innovate” (UKRI), have been established with the purpose of allowing the government to directly intervene in Higher Education for their own political purposes.

Opposition among education staff to the measures is substantial. In a YouGov poll of lecturers and professors at universities nationwide, 81 percent of those surveyed believed the government's plans to give private providers easier access to degree-awarding powers will have a negative impact.

A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), a higher education think tank, raised concerns over how alternative providers—given easier access to university

status under government proposals—will be able to use their institutions for profit.

According to Robin Middlehurst, an author of the HEPI report, “Better protection of the public purse is overdue, especially given the growth in the number of for-profit providers... Experience in the USA and Australia shows overly generous rules for alternative providers are a magnet for questionable business practices. The end results can include stranded students, a bill for taxpayers and regulatory intervention.”

Indeed, as the US example shows, competition between for-profit institutions does nothing to improve educational standards for students. According to a study by the US Senate's Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, competition between universities merely encourages the institutions to spend more on aesthetic measures to attract students, and comparatively less on instruction, lowering educational standards.

In 2009, for example, for-profit colleges in the US spent 22.7 percent of their revenue on marketing, advertising, recruiting, and admissions staffing; 19.4 percent of revenue went to the institution's owner as profit; and a mere 17.2 percent of all revenue was spent on instruction.

The government's bill is forecast to triple the number of private and alternative providers in the UK who receive public funding over the next 10 years, according to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. They will increase from the 110 who are currently eligible for government student support, to 311.

Connected with this attack on public provision of higher education is the proposed introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This will rank universities by “quality,” with the highest-ranking institutions being permitted to raise their tuition fees in line with inflation from the academic year 2017-2018. Many universities have already begun imposing the increase—from £9,000 to £9,250—from the beginning of this academic year.

Divorcing the link between university teaching and research, under the TEF the “quality” of a university will be

established through a student satisfaction survey, the National Student Survey (NSS), student retention statistics, and graduate earnings data—rather than through the quality of research output and teaching standards.

Many academics have strongly criticised these measures, arguing that the proposed metrics do not measure educational quality at all, and that TEF will only further increase social inequality by pushing poorer students out of many universities. The inevitable outcome will be a consolidation of an already solidly tiered higher education system, with the best universities accessible only to the rich and the poorest left to attend underfunded institutions,—which, on account of their poorer status—will not attract new funds and end up as “sink schools.”

The Labour Party, National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Union (UCU) have put up only token opposition to the Bill.

Neither have the unions organised any serious any resistance. Since the enforcing of mass austerity began in the UK following the global financial crash of 2008, the higher education unions have collaborated in unprecedented cuts and the accelerated privatisation in the sector. 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.

Commenting on the government’s plans, Sean Wallis, a National Executive member of the University and College Union (UCU) condemned the TEF, stating, “These measures are nothing to do with education quality. Indeed, the easiest way to make students ‘satisfied’ is to promise them a first class degree! Using graduate earnings as a ‘proxy for quality’ punishes universities for offering places to poorer students, who are less likely to get well-paid graduate jobs than well-connected, wealthier students....This is an absurd, socially regressive attack on young people—as well as on the universities.”

Concealed by such comments is the fact that the UCU offered no serious resistance to the Bill. Aside from organising a token demonstration last November—at which UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt called on Theresa May to “show some humanity”—both the UCU and National Union of Students (NUS) called only for a boycott of the NSS.

Faced with a massive programme of privatisation and the further erosion of equal access to higher education, the extent of the opposition of the UCU and NUS was a call on their members to decline to fill out a survey!

As the Bill made its passage through parliament, the NUS and Labour Party took part in “constructive engagement” with it, according to Labour Students. The Labour group

said the NUS were “suggesting amendments and, rightfully and at the insistence of Labour MPs” decided “to give evidence to the Bill Committee.” Labour tabled a number of amendments to the Bill, centering on establishing a “students’ bill of rights,” with Labour Students commenting, “In a fast-changing Higher Education sector, students now more than ever need better protections, more information and fairness, as these amendments proposed.” None of this challenges in any way the fundamental nature of the attacks the Bill proposes.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats allied in the House of Lords and passed an amendment during its committee hearing stage. The amendment merely stated that universities “must provide an extensive range of high-quality academic subjects delivered by excellent teaching,” as well as make “a contribution to society...” Wilf Stevenson, Labour’s shadow higher education minister, played down the objectives of the latest bill, claiming that the main problem was that it “fails to understand the purposes of higher education.” On this basis he declared, “The Bill before us does not define a university and we think it would be improved if it does so.”

Due to the discrediting of the NUS, UCU and their ilk, supposedly more radical, “left” organisations like the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), backed by various pseudo-left outfits, have become increasingly prominent.

Students must draw the lessons of previous betrayals in assessing the claims of such groups to be an alternative to attacks on education. In 2011, one year after the NCAFC’s founding, the *World Socialist Web Site* made the following assessment: “A self-described “network of student and education worker activists” with close ties to the Unison and RMT trade unions. The middle class “left” groups that lead the NCAFC insist the only way forward for students is to persuade the National Union of Students and the trade unions to fight tuition increases.”

Events since then, including the government’s ability to prepare further attacks through its latest bill, with virtually no opposition from these organisations, vindicates this analysis.



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