

UK government proposes raising fees for two-year degree courses

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Britain's Conservative government is considering further raising fees for students studying two-year "accelerated" degree programmes. Currently, fees charged for these qualifications are capped at £9,000 per annum, a cost that is already prohibitive for many prospective students. However, according to the Conservative supporting *Daily Telegraph*, the government could seek to amend the Higher Education and Research Bill—currently being debated in Parliament—to allow more flexible fee caps on such courses.

Fees caps are currently set per year of education at universities in England, meaning that while a two-year condensed degree provides the student with the same qualification as its three-year equivalent, universities cannot charge more than £18,000 for them. Under the new proposal, this limitation would be lifted, enabling universities to raise their fees to a yet unspecified "flexible" cap—possibly even up to the £27,000 currently charged for three-year programmes, despite these courses being significantly shorter.

These proposals come after a letter from the Competitions and Marketing Authority (CMA) to the government last July recommended that universities offering fast-track courses be allowed to charge an "appropriate" fee, in order to increase choice for students and "[help] to improve the quality of HE [higher education] provision."

The CMA, a supposedly "independent," non-ministerial government department, states that its role is, to "make markets work well for consumers, businesses and the economy," with one of its "strategic goals" that of "extending competition frontiers—by using the markets regime to improve the way competition works, in particular within the regulated sectors."

The claim that raising fees is intended to improve educational standards and options for students is a barefaced lie. As the rest of the CMA letter explains, their real concern over the £18,000 fee cap is that it "reduces providers' incentive and ability to find more flexible and efficient ways of delivering courses."

The reality is that far from increasing choice for students, these proposals will provide many private institutions with "an incentive to compete on the price of such courses below the higher cap," increasing the subordination of the Higher Education system to a growing educational "market." Rather than competing to keep prices down, the CMA's recommendations will most likely cause universities to raise prices to meet the "cap," as was the case when fee regulations for standard courses were lifted in 2011, prompting the vast majority of universities to immediately up their fees to meet the "limit" of £9,000 per annum.

These proposals come at the same time as a host of other attacks on education are being proposed in the Higher Education and Research Bill. Under this bill, HE institutions will be ranked according to "quality," with those at the top of the table being allowed to raise tuition to £9,250, which many universities have now done for the academic year beginning September 2017. The Bill also makes it easier for "alternative providers"—read private institutions—to gain university status.

There are currently more than 700 "alternative providers" in the UK, including many for-profit institutions. These measures, also touted by the government as offering students "more choice," would further hasten the process of privatising and marketising education that began in force in 2010. In that year, BPP University College became the first UK private HE provider since 1976 to achieve university

status. More than 120 of these providers now run courses that are eligible for government student finance loans, funnelling £382 million into private hands between 2014 and 2015.

BPP University College, with its eight city campuses across the UK, is one of the few universities in the country to already offer two-year accelerated courses. In fact, while there are currently only around 20 institutions nationwide who offer such courses, more than half of them are privately run.

Concerns were already raised over the perceived benefits of condensing a three-year course into two as early as 2006, when the first “compressed” degrees were introduced under Tony Blair’s Labour government. It was feared that accelerated degrees would reduce the quality of education for students, as they would not have sufficient time to assimilate their lessons, as well as putting additional pressure on academic staff who would have to teach throughout the summer break.

In an interview with the *Independent*, Professor Peter Main, director of education and science at the Institute of Physics, stated: “There are several problems with two-year degree programmes. ... [In] subjects such as physics, students encounter exciting but challenging concepts, such as quantum mechanics. A thorough appreciation of these topics requires time. Secondly, degrees are best taught by people who are active in research—most academics set aside the summer for research. If they lose it to teaching, they will necessarily diminish their research capability.”

As well as possible educational disadvantages, two-year programmes were criticised for increasing the financial pressure on students from low-income backgrounds—many of whom have to work part-time jobs throughout term time or the summer holidays in order to meet the skyrocketing costs of HE. This becomes much more difficult for students enrolled in these more intensive courses.

The “flexible cap” on fees would provide another financial disincentive for prospective students, and would only decrease access to HE for poorer students—further exacerbating social inequality.

The increasingly unequal access to education is apparent from the latest figures released by UCAS, the national body responsible for university admissions. The gap between rich and poor students going to

university has now reached a record high, with a difference of 16.7 percent points. Recipients of free school meals—an indicator of poverty-level income—are now less than half as likely to enter university as their more affluent peers.

Those students who are lucky enough to enter HE go on to enter the job market with an average of £44,000 of student debt, with some estimates reaching £100,000 once interest rates are taken into account. Regents University, an independent institution in London, was recently named the most expensive university in London, with estimated yearly costs of tuition standing at a staggering £38,854. Other prestigious London universities, as well as the University of Oxford, also rank within the top 10 for tuition costs.

While issuing mealy-mouthed protestations about the proposal to raise fees for two-year courses, neither the National Union of Students (NUS) nor the University and College Union (UCU) made any suggestion that they opposed fees in principle. They merely urge the government, respectively, to “restructure funding” and to “look again at the support for part-time study and not the opening up of an uncapped fee market.”



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