

Tuition fees review will escalate marketisation of higher education in UK

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Prime Minister Theresa May has begun a year-long government review of university tuition fees, led by City financier Philip Augur.

The review heralds the next major stage in the marketization of higher education. This process began with the introduction and later tripling of tuition fees by the Labour Party in 1998 and 2004, and will result, sooner rather than later, in the closure of courses and universities that supposedly do not offer “value.” In the process, the best university education will be secured as the exclusive privilege of the rich.

At the centre of discussions is the introduction of market-based pricing for degree courses, based on likely graduate earnings. According to May, the current tuition fees system does not deliver sufficient competition on price and should offer “better value” for students. As she lamented in her speech announcing the fee review, “The competitive market between universities which the system of variable tuition fees envisaged has simply not emerged.”

This echoed earlier comments by Education Secretary Damian Hinds, who said that “more variety” was needed in the price of university education. “What we need to look at,” he declared, “is the different aspects of pricing—the cost that it is to put on the course, the value that it is to the student and also the value to our society as a whole and to our economy for the future.”

Hinds also suggested greater “flexibility” in how courses are delivered. By this is meant the introduction of shorter, two-year degrees, the encouragement of “commuter degrees”—with students living at home and traveling to university each day—and the expansion of part-time university education.

Finally, calls have been made for a turn to technical and vocational education. Early in February, Robert Hafton, chair of the education select committee,

cautioned against what he considered a tendency to “lavishly furnish universities” at the expense of vocational skills. “Existing universities,” he said, “that do not provide a good return on academic courses could reinvent themselves as centres of technical excellence.”

A full-blown market system will rein in higher education. The most prestigious degree programs and universities, charging the highest fees, will be the preserve of the rich, while poorer students will be offered cut-price vocational courses.

The extension of part-time and short courses will not widen access to education, but see the elimination of many full degrees, considered to be wasted on working class and lower-middle class youth.

Once the competitive market system is in place, inequalities in university education will expand still further.

When former Labour Education Secretary Charles Clarke says that charging fees based on graduates’ likely financial returns would “significantly reduce fees for millions of students,” he neglects to mention the other side of the deal. It will only be a matter of time before Oxford University, for example, makes the argument that their Law degree is worth £12,000 or more per year, and the government will duly raise the cap.

At the other end of the scale, courses and even entire institutions that are deemed not to offer sufficient economic “value” to their student “consumers” or the economy will be run down and eventually shut down.

It has long been a basic premise of progressive thinking that education ought to be made widely available, not just for monetary advantage, but for personal and social development. There is no constituency for this idea in the contemporary politics of the British ruling class, which consists of haggling

over how best to tailor higher education to the profit interests of UK businesses.

University vice-chancellors and higher education representatives and spokesmen, speaking mainly through the *Guardian*, have raised alarm bells over the impact that these changes—particularly reduced fees—will have on lower-tariff universities. Such comments from these sources ought to be read with caution.

There is undoubtedly a crisis among lower-tariff universities. The removal of the cap on student numbers set in motion a process whereby mid- and high-tariff universities began aggressively competing for more and more students and their associated funding, leaving many lower tariff institutions in precarious financial positions. Some are in danger of closing down if funding from students is reduced. But the fundamental problem is not potential cuts to some tuition fees. It is rather the existence of a marketized, fee-based system in the first place.

The same applies when cuts to university fees are labelled a “subsidy to Tory voters,” on the basis that poorer students will pay back little or nothing on their loans anyway. Or, as the *Guardian*’s education editor put it, “Under the current loans system, those well-paid graduates will pay back far more of their student loans. ... So they do end up paying variable fees.”

These arguments pass over the fact that student loans pay a high interest rate of 6.1 percent and poorer students will be saddled with more than £50,000 of debt for most of their working lives—debt which is, moreover, being sold off to private interests. The holders of these debts will not be satisfied for long with the existing system and will demand guarantees that loans they take on are repaid in full.

Higher education leaders, together with the National Union of Students, the education unions and their pseudo-left cheerleaders, offered token resistance to Labour’s introduction and tripling of tuition fees, then quickly accommodated themselves to the new reality, working hard to ensure their own financial positions. When the Tories expanded on Labour’s education plans in 2012, the charade, now bolstered by Labour, was repeated—only now it was not a question of defending free education, but tuition fees of £3,000 a year. Today, the supposed defenders of fair access to education are essentially arguing for maintaining

universal fees of £9,250 a year.

In a lame attempt to sweeten the bitter pill forced on students, there have been some calls for reduced interest rates on student loans and the reintroduction of more favourable maintenance loans and maintenance grants. Nicky Morgan and Justine Greening have been particularly vocal on this score. The support of the two former Conservative education secretaries makes clear that, should these suggestions produce any change at all, it will be of a cosmetic character.

Labour continues to promise to restore maintenance grants and abolish tuition fees entirely. But party leader Jeremy Corbyn has rowed back hard on an election promise to cancel existing student debts, relegating this to the level of an “aspiration.”

A few weeks ago, in the midst of the ongoing Haringey social cleansing scandal, Corbyn proposed an additional £2 billion in funding for all UK councils. This is less than 20 percent of the £11.3 billion in funding cuts councils have already suffered. If he has the same level of commitment to securing funds for higher education, and still wishes to abolish tuition fees, this will require a more than 80 percent reduction in the number of people going to university.

A return to the system of free tuition, let alone its extension to all who want it, is in direct conflict with the profit demands of British business and its program of austerity. It is not Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell’s promised “fiscally responsible” government or the protestations of university spokespersons that will wrench the right to higher education from the capitalist class, but the unified struggle of workers and student youth for socialism.



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