

UK government demands universities slash “low-value” courses in return for financial aid

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Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced last month that government “bailouts” for universities in financial crisis will be conditional on slashing dozens of courses deemed “low-value.”

This marks a new stage in the government’s assault on higher education and presages a fundamental restructuring of the sector.

The coronavirus pandemic has dealt a staggering blow to universities, already weakened by years of marketisation and privatization. A quarter of institutions were in deficit in early March this year, with several teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Now, according to analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 13 universities face “a very real prospect” of going bust, while the sector more broadly could see losses of between £3 billion and £19 billion in the long term.

Williamson has responded by announcing that government loans will be granted to struggling institutions on a “case by case basis,” provided they meet a list of demands. These conditions are geared towards closing off access to university education for working class students by axing dozens of courses and allowing the bankruptcy of poorer universities.

The education secretary explained, “We need our universities to achieve great value for money—delivering the skills and a workforce that will drive our economy and nation to thrive in the years ahead.” Higher education providers, he said, would only receive assistance “as a last resort” and would be required to focus on providing subjects that result in better job prospects for graduates. Even with the cull of “low-value” courses, and despite the threat of whole universities going bankrupt, the plans state that “There is no guarantee of support.”

By “low-value courses,” Williamson means degree programs with low graduate earnings. This criterion

specifically targets courses taken by poorer students at predominantly working-class universities. Graduates from lower income backgrounds earn less than those from higher income backgrounds—an average of 30 percent less than those from the wealthiest one fifth of families. Degrees from less prestigious universities (with much higher proportions of working-class students) command significantly lower salaries. A sociology degree from Bradford University, for example, sees graduates earning £17,500 three years after graduation, whereas the same degree from Cambridge earns graduates an average of £29,000.

Working class youth will therefore have the range of courses they can access slashed, particularly in the arts and social sciences, whose graduates are especially poorly paid. Some poorer communities will lose entire universities. In 2019, according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 28.75 percent of the most disadvantaged four-fifths of 18-year-olds began a full-time degree, compared to 57.7 percent of the most advantaged fifth. This disparity will grow as whole sections of higher education are cut away.

The demand that universities axe “low-value” courses is part of a long-developed plan. In 2018, the Augur Review was established by Theresa May’s Tory government to address “low value, low quality” degrees, with a focus on promoting further education training as an alternative to universities. At the time, Education Secretary Damian Hinds called on universities to “drop or revamp” courses that don’t give “value for money” and Robert Halfon, chair of the education select committee, argued that “Existing universities that do not provide a good return on academic courses could reinvent themselves as centers of technical excellence.” The 2019 Tory manifesto pledged to find ways “to tackle the problem... of low-

quality courses.”

With the onset of the crisis in higher education triggered by the pandemic, these elitist ideas have been kicked up a gear. The Policy Exchange think tank has submitted a report to the Department for Education which argues, “The UK is unusual in that universities are private charities and not subject to direct state control but current bail out conditions provides Government short term leverage to weed out weaker courses.” The Institute of Economic Affairs also asks ministers to consider “closing many institutions and courses” and “offering the assets and staff to people and organizations who wish to try something new.”

The key motivation for these arguments is the fact that huge numbers of graduates cannot repay their student loans as repayments start only when a graduate begins earning more than £26,575 a year. Around 45 percent of the value of these loans will never be recouped by the government—adding £12 billion to its deficit, rising to £17 billion in three years’ time—because wages are so low. Now, the government and its advisors intend to use these same low wages to justify gutting young people’s already severely limited educational opportunities—considered a financial sinkhole by the ruling class.

This is the culmination of a bi-partisan policy of marketisation in higher education. The process began with the introduction of tuition fees by the Labour Party in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the specific intention of making universities reliant on private sources of income. It reached an inflection point with the Conservative Party’s 2017 Higher Education and Research Act which established the Office for Students, whose mandate was to act as a “market regulator” and “competition authority.” The result is a destructive cycle of competition amongst universities for student numbers and private investment, driving the “losers,” overwhelmingly those institutions catering for poorer students, towards bankruptcy.

In the next months and years, the working class, already relegated to bottom-tier universities in the market system, will either be kicked out altogether, crammed into overcrowded bare-necessities courses, or moved into a second-class further education and vocational system. High quality, well-rounded education will be reserved for the elite. On July 9, Williamson officially junked Tony Blair’s target of

sending 50 percent of young people to university—itself an entirely fraudulent promise of “social mobility.”

The consequence of these attacks will be the cultural impoverishment of the working class and the loss of essential skills. Whether a course is kept or discarded will not be based on its value to an individual and their development, or the broad social, political, and cultural needs of wider society, but on whether or not it serves the interests of the super-rich.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s “Kickstart Scheme,” a cheap labour programme announced as part of the government’s multibillion-pound bailout package, shows the “alternatives” which the Tories have in mind for young people. Under the scheme, under-18s are taken “under the wing” of massive companies (including McDonalds, Costa, Tesco, and Aldi) and labelled “apprentices” before being paid a pitiful £4.15 per hour, £6.45 once they reach 18 and eventually peaking at just £8.20 for 21-24 year olds. The firms are incentivized with £2,000 for every “additional” apprentice they take on.

As with government bailouts of the banks and big business, and corporate “restructuring” programs costing thousands of jobs, the ruling class has seized on the pandemic to advance its reactionary objectives in higher education. It is given a free hand to do so by the Labour Party and the University and College Union (UCU), who for years have limited university workers and students to ineffective strikes over single issues.

The campaign for universal high-quality and well-rounded education must base itself on the independent struggle of the working class for socialism. The pandemic has brought to the surface the complete irreconcilability of the bankrupt capitalist system with the needs of society. A political offensive must be waged against the profit system as the only viable means to protect the interests and welfare of the working class and young people.



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