

Anger mounts at UK government proposal to halve arts education subsidy

Paul Bond
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More than 160,000 in Britain have signed a petition against proposed cuts to funding of arts subjects. There has been widespread anger at the Conservative government's call to halve its subsidy support for "courses that are not among its strategic priorities—covering subjects in music, dance, drama and performing arts; art and design; media studies; and archaeology."

This is deepening of the wholesale attack on arts education and cultural provision, that will deny larger sections of working class youth access to the field.

The government is proposing a cut to the student subsidy support available from the Office for Students (OfS). Part of the £1.47 billion teaching budget, this helps institutions to fund teaching in high-cost subjects on top of tuition fees. The proposal would cut the subsidy for an individual student in the affected courses from £243 to £121.50.

The government launched an OfS "consultation" on the proposal. The OfS made clear the nature of this consultation, stating that it was "not consulting on the total amount of funding available for distribution," as this is predetermined by the government's grant. The consultation only "seeks views" on "a statutory guidance letter... which sets out the funds available... and the related funding policies and priorities that [the government] wishes us to implement."

The exercise was to channel anger at the cuts in order to then implement the government's proposals. These were laid out clearly in the statutory guidance letter, which proposed an increase to high-cost subject funding "for subjects identified as supporting the NHS [National Health Service] and wider healthcare policy, high-cost science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and/or specific labour market needs."

This would be offset by "A reduction by half to high-cost subject funding for other price group C1

subjects—that is, for courses in performing and creative arts, media studies and archaeology."

The OfS sought to downplay the impact of the cuts, telling the *Guardian* that they "relate to a small fraction of how these courses are funded, equating to a reduction of... 1 percent of overall funding." The spokesperson insisted again that the OfS "has a fixed funding budget that is set by government," while pointing to a government commitment to deepen these cuts. The "difficult decisions about how to prioritise our increasingly constrained budget" were based on the understanding that it "will have to stretch further in the coming years."

This was laid out by Education Secretary Gavin Williamson in his statutory guidance letter, where he wrote, "The OfS should reprioritise funding towards the provision of high-cost, high-value subjects... We would then potentially seek further reductions in future years."

The proposal exemplifies the government's attitude towards funding for wider education generally and about broader cultural questions specifically. For the ruling class, education is a functional tool of capitalist production and exploitation in what Williamson called "high-value subjects." On this basis, access to culture, much less active involvement in its creation, should be of no concern to working class youth.

Williamson told the *Conservative Home* blog that the proposals would enable the OfS "to crack down on low quality courses" and allow students to "embrace the opportunities offered by degree apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, modular learning and our flagship Institutes of Technology."

Lest anyone miss his point, he added, "The record number of people taking up science and engineering demonstrates that many are already starting to pivot away from dead-end courses that leave young people with nothing but debt."

What leaves students with “nothing but debt” is the punitive tuition fee and student loan system, introduced by Tony Blair’s 1997 Labour government and hiked up by successive governments.

The Treasury sees the current student loan scheme as unaffordable. Peers have warned that the scheme would cost around £1 trillion by 2040, with nearly 83 percent of loans never being repaid in full because graduates are not meeting the £27,295 a year salary threshold at which repayments begin.

A cut in tuition fees, from the present £9,250 to a maximum of £7,500 a year, is under discussion. To these ends Williamson is spearheading his attack on the arts and humanities, where the government calculates it stands to lose the most revenue.

The government is backing a cuts agenda already well underway. London South Bank intends to stop teaching history and human geography. Hull University is axing foreign language degrees. Aston University has plans to close its history and language department. Among the areas threatened by Leicester University’s savage redundancy programme is the teaching of Mediaeval and Modern Literature in the English department, a plan described by University of Bristol scholars as “cultural vandalism.”

The brunt of this savagery will fall on the arts and humanities in the newer universities, underscoring the class character of the attack. For the ruling class, culture is *their* preserve. The Department for Education assured the *Independent*, “High-quality provision in a range of subjects is critical,” so they had asked OfS to allocate “an additional £10 million to our world-leading specialist providers, including several top arts institutions.”

The OfS proposals would also see “The withdrawal of the allocation and weightings that support the additional costs of London compared to other regions.”

Beyond its impact on working class students in London, this will have an adverse effect on the arts. Six arts, design, fashion and performing arts colleges were federated into the University of the Arts London in 2003, which has a central focus for arts training and study.

The Contemporary Visual Arts Network organised an open letter of protest, focused on the place of the arts in the economy, noting, “The creative industries contributed £116bn in Gross Value Added in 2019 and support one in every 16 jobs.” All of this is based on arts education, with some two-thirds of employees in the sector having a degree, “evidencing the value of the universities and schools of art.”

The #ArtIsEssential campaign will be holding a digital protest on June 10. The letter, issued as part of the protest, was signed by more than 300 figures in the art world, including directors of the Tate galleries, the Whitechapel Gallery, the Serpentine Gallery, Manchester Art Gallery, and many university departments.

As well as the economic place of the arts, the letter spoke of “the essential role they play in the long-term cultural infrastructure, creative ambition and wellbeing of the nation.”

The Visual Arts Alliance emphasised the economic aspects of the cuts resulting from fewer arts courses being offered, as well as a decline in the number of skilled workers in the creative industries. Director Sharon Heal expressed the Museum Association’s concern at the proposed cuts. “The areas affected, including archaeology, art and music, are vital to a flourishing culture sector, and we urge the government to support entry to careers in these areas through a variety of routes including higher education and for people from all backgrounds.”

The Public Campaign for the Arts petition described the halving of subsidy funding to arts subjects as “an attack on the future of UK arts, the creative potential of the next generation, and the people who deliver our world-leading arts courses.”

The petition, which has received over 160,000 signatures, opposes “segregating and devaluing the arts in this way.” It calls for “important investment in creative skills, ensuring that arts courses are widely accessible and properly supported.”

It is not a question of deciding between alternatives for funding. The arts and cultural life must be accessible to all, and they require funding for training and education. Billions must be made available for arts and cultural studies and these subjects integrated into a comprehensive and universal education programme. This requires the establishment of workers’ ownership and democratic control of the banks and corporations and the wealth of the super-rich.



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