

# Towards US-style education

**The Government's attacks on further and higher education come under two broad headings — the privatisation of education and the erosion of student financial support.**

The groundwork for the privatisation of public sector education has already been laid through the Education Reform Act. April 1st 1989 is 'vesting day', the day the Polys and colleges formally leave local authority control and take charge of their own finances.

The governing bodies of these institutions will radically alter — from democratically accountable representatives (like councillors, trade unionists, and students) to at least 50% of governors nominated from business and industry. College directorates will have far more power than previously — to privatise services, renegotiate wages and conditions locally, alter the balance of courses, sell buildings and land, and drop commitments to equal opportunities.

Already in some institutions the directors are sending out new contracts to all their staff (and it's not just the employer's name which is new) and changing long-established and negotiated working practices. Many of the new college governors are noted not for their commitment to education but for their record on 'rationalisation' and redundancies in the businesses they run!

In other institutions the Government's 'challenge' has sent directors scurrying into the arms of nearby colleges — and in this context 'nearby' can mean up to 100 miles away. All the signs are that we are in for a spate of ill-conceived college mergers, with job losses and course closures.

Whilst talking about increasing access, the Tories are taking education out of democratic control, putting their co-thinkers in place as 'managers', systematically starving the system of resources, and encouraging 'competition' between public and private sectors.

Meanwhile students' entitlement to a free education is being eroded. The real value of the student grant has dropped by 25 per cent since 1979, and it wasn't generous then. Parental contributions have risen by over 200%. Largely out of desperation, students have begun to claim welfare benefits on a massive scale — housing benefit, and unemployment and supplementary benefits (now Income Support) in the vacations.

As the value of the grant dropped, student unions started mass rent-registration drives and, in cooperation with local councils, organised mass benefit claims.

The Tories introduced full-cost fees for overseas students, abolished the 'equipment allowance' for many courses, halved then abolished the minimum grant,

Liz Millward surveys the British Tory Government's drive to 'privatise' further and higher education and to force students to support themselves financially

abolished the travel grant for students in England and Wales, stopped 'covenants' which gave tax relief to parents, and, through the Fowler Reviews, stopped many students claiming housing and other benefits.

At the same time local authorities were cutting back on discretionary awards, and in some cases abolishing them altogether for certain courses, so that young people were more likely to finish up on YTS than at college. Those who did study under the '21 hour' loophole were stopped last year when the Government made YTS compulsory.

Clearly the government's intention was



to close down many of the routes into further and higher education, particularly for working-class youth, mature students, and women. The erosion of financial support for those already in higher education was also deliberate.

The government (wrongly) thought that students would be less hostile to proposals for loans if they were virtually penniless. Exactly on cue, the Tories have introduced a White Paper outlining a system of student loans. At the same time leaked Tory discussion papers reveal even more devastating plans to introduce a system of tuition fees and 'vouchers' which would, if enacted, restrict free education of a high standard to about 15% of the student population, leaving the rest to struggle by on a mixture of loans, grants, and American-style 'work-study'.

In addition, colleges would have to compete with each other for students (or rather their fees), with only a few prestigious institutions able to offer anything like the quality of education now generally available. A student's ability to get a good education would be in direct relation to their parents' spending power.

The loan proposals currently outlined would leave students worse off by about

£100 a year — and with big debts by the end of their courses. In the short term, the scheme will cost more to set up and administer than simply giving the money to students. All the international evidence points to loan systems being inefficient, costly, and likely to reduce access for working-class, women, mature, disabled and black students.

Neither the banks nor the Treasury want to guarantee or administer the scheme. Students don't want loans, and they have the full backing of the campus unions.

The logical conclusion of what the Tories are doing will be an American-style higher education system. Every institution will be expected to stand on its own, competing with all the others, and getting finance from wherever it can — with a heavy emphasis on the private sector. This will inevitably lead to lower standards at the 'cheaper end of the market', while the prestigious institutions, the equivalents of Harvard and Yale, will get more money and become even more elitist.

In other words, there is a determined class basis for what the Tories are planning. They want to take us back to the streaming concepts of the 1944 Education Act, with children being educated for 'their station in life'. Working-class children will be channelled into 'vocational' courses earlier and earlier in life, with the City Technology Colleges (for those both talented and lucky) leading to a few subsidised places in higher education.

Middle-class children will get precisely the education their parents can afford — and there will of course be provision for buying your way into college for the very rich. Subjects like the arts, law, medicine, architecture will once again become the privilege of those with a lot of money. Openings in these fields will simply not be available to working-class people.

Our response to these attacks must be as well-planned, thorough-going and comprehensive as possible. The Tories' proposals all fit together, and serve the ends of their class. Our response should be the same — we should be absolutely clear about what we are doing, and prepared to fight for our class interests.

Students should fight with our allies — the trade unions, Labour Parties, community groups, and all those who will lose out if the Tories get their way. Within NUS we have to get in touch with our own membership, and take the message out to school students. Our aim must be to unite around a package of demands, related to action to win those demands. There are no short-cuts to beating the Tories, and no easy victories based on hoping for the best and smiling nicely at back-bench Tories.

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