

UK: Office for Students spearheads privatisation and policing of universities

By Thomas Scripps
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The establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) marks a new stage in the assault on higher education in the UK, with grave implications for a speeding up of privatisation and the policing of political life on campus.

The legal basis for the OfS was laid down in the Higher Education and Research Act in January 2017, in the face of massive opposition. Fully 81 percent of professors and lecturers surveyed by YouGov believed the bill would have a negative impact. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, the passing of the Act represented “the introduction of measures designed to lower the requirements that educational institutions must satisfy in order to attain university status. The aim is to further open up the higher education ‘market’ to ‘alternative providers’—that is, private institutions.”

The OfS is mandated to grow the education “market” and has been given “New Degree Awarding Powers” to do so. These powers allow the OfS to grant degree-awarding status to institutions without requiring them to demonstrate a track record of successfully delivering higher education, as was previously the case.

As early as 2012, the BBC reported that the government had approved more than 400 degree and diploma courses at private universities, without checking the quality of courses offered or student completion rates. In the same year, the amount of money paid to private colleges through unregulated courses trebled to £100 million. The number of students on those courses doubled in the same period.

Between 2010 and 2015, the amount of publicly backed funding for private colleges skyrocketed from £30 million to £1 billion. A major beneficiary of these public funds has been Greenwich School of Management, owned by Sovereign Capital. The private equity fund’s co-founder, John Nash, was made an education minister in the Conservative government in 2013, responsible for free schools and academies, and served as the government’s spokesman on education in the House of Lords.

All of this is only a prelude to what will happen once the OfS becomes operational in April. Yet very little discussion of these issues has found its way into the mainstream media. Instead the press, along with that of the Labour Party and the National Union of Students, focused on the announcement that Toby Young had been appointed to lead the OfS.

The primary political reasons for the appointment of Young, who occupies a position on the right of the Conservative Party, was his ardent championing of the privatisation of education and his following among the hardened reactionaries won through his crusades against “the left” at universities. Young, a leader of the Tories Free Schools initiative, heads the New Schools Network, advising state-funded but privately run schools that come under the control of the Department for Education (DfE). Building on the Blair Labour government’s Academy project for schools, Free Schools have been granted even greater powers over the teaching curriculum, pupil admissions and staff pay and conditions.

This track record was reinforced by his reputation as a self-proclaimed warrior against all things “politically correct,” with Young acting as an

intellectual blood brother of Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. His appointment was preceded by the threat that universities could be fined by the OfS for “no platforming” individuals such as gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell and the feminist Germaine Greer over their views on transgender issues, and various, often ludicrous, measures taken to ensure that education institutions are “safe spaces” for minorities.

Young was hailed by the government as the right man to put an end to such illiberal stupidities. However, in the next days, the focus on Young’s own illiberal views threatened to scupper the OfS initiative before it had even started.

Some cited his columns for the *Spectator*, in which he wrote that the term “inclusive” was “one of those ghastly, politically correct words that has survived the demise of New Labour,” involving the “ghastly inclusivity” of wheelchair ramps in schools, and his description of working class students who secure places at Oxford as “universally unattractive,” “small” and “vaguely deformed.” But most attention was centred on innumerable crude remarks he had made about women’s breasts.

As 200,000 people signed a petition demanding his removal, the government tried to tough it out, but Young eventually resigned on the very day University College London announced it was launching an investigation into one of its senior academics, James Thompson, who had hosted secret conferences on eugenics and intelligence in its premises. The London Conference on Intelligence featured speakers from white supremacist groups and was attended in May by 24 invited guests, including none other than Young!

Young, who once suggested that low IQ, unemployed fathers should have vasectomies, also announced his resignation from the Fulbright Commission overseeing student scholarship programmes between British and US universities.

That such a man was even considered to head the OfS gives the lie to its pretence to be a defender of free speech. However, Young’s departure does not change the role of the OfS one iota. Young said he decided to resign because he had “become a distraction from ... vital work of broadening access to higher education and defending academic freedom.”

“Broadening access to higher education” means opening the sector up to the market, which is why the OfS board is chaired by Michael Barber, formerly the head of Tony Blair’s “delivery unit,” with a history of enforcing unpopular and undemocratic government policy. He is supported by Deputy Chair Martin Coleman, who specialises in competition policy, and Chris Millward, previously involved with the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), designed to prepare the way for increases in tuition fees.

Working with them are Katja Hall (former public relations worker for HSBC and deputy director-general of the Confederation of British Industry), Elizabeth Fragan (former marketing and managing director of Boots), Simon Levine (managing partner at international law firm DLA Piper) and Gurpreet Dehal (an investment banker who formerly worked

with Credit Suisse and Merrill Lynch). Dehal is also a trustee of the multi-school academy trust E-Act and is not alone in having business interests in the further marketization of education. Katherine Lander is director of strategy and operations at Eukleia & LEO, a company that provides training for the Higher Education sector. Carl Lygo is a founding member of the private BPP University, owned by the billion-dollar US-based Apollo Group of private universities. The board will be overseen by new Universities Minister Sam Gyimah, an ex-investment banker and open exponent of privatisation.

Accompanied by lifting the cap on tuition fees and selling off of student debt to private holders, the OfS is meant to complete the basic framework for the wholesale privatisation of higher education.

The government's agenda has come this far only because of the retreats and betrayals of the education unions, the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Labour Party.

When the Higher Education and Research Act was proposed last year, the University and College Union (UCU) mounted only a token protest, while the NUS and Labour focused their collective efforts on passing ineffectual amendments and "providing evidence" to those drafting the bill. Now that the Act has come into force, all these organisations have made their peace with its provisions.

Labour's recent criticisms avoided the central issue posed by the establishment of the OfS by focusing on Young—on the basis that his appointment represented a "missed opportunity" for the OfS to ensure the "diversity of the sector it must regulate," as Shadow Education Minister Gordon Marsden put it. With Young now gone, Labour is primed to back a suitably diverse OfS.

The UCU and NUS opposed the OfS largely because they were not being included on its leading committees.

The most devastating indictment of the politics of the NUS is that it has used the crisis surrounding Young's appointment to negotiate a position for some of its leading representatives as advisers to the OfS. A 13-member student panel, including NUS President Shakira Martin and other high-profile advocates of "no platforming" and "safe-spaces," will now advise the OfS on its twin aims of privatisation and policing political life on campus, including plans to empower the organisation "to enter and search premises in England occupied by supported higher education providers."

The reactionary evolution of "no platforming"

The NUS has stressed throughout that only six groups are officially subject to a blanket ban across UK campuses: the Islamist Al-Muhajiroun, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK, and the far-right British National Party, English Defence League and National Action. With the support of Labour Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner, the NUS argued that this is in line with Parliament determining what constitutes hate speech and that students who felt uncomfortable with views that do not come within that definition had to become "resilient and learn to deal with controversial opinions."

Now, campaigns have been mounted against individuals such as Greer, and Tatchell for defending her. Outrageously, Sheffield University Students' Union tried to bar Julian Assange from giving a talk (via weblink), claiming this expressed the union's "zero tolerance" policy towards sexual assault—of which Assange was fraudulently accused—and elsewhere against George Galloway for defending Assange, which was denounced as "rape apology."

Unlike the 1970s, when mass student mobilisations prevented fascist groups from entering campuses, no platforming is essentially anti-democratic, centring on appeals to the authorities and the state for proscriptions that are inevitably then used more broadly. Historically they have been directed against socialists. The latest round of such campaigns is unambiguously reactionary, serving to corrode democratic rights in a

manner that has been a gift to the right wing by allowing the likes of Young to pose as champions of free speech.

The NUS has happily used its stance on the issue as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the government, but many students disagree with its actions.

The role of identity politics

The advocates of identity politics on campus routinely browbeat students with accusations of sexism, inherent racism, etc., which is now routinely and falsely associated with "the left."

The primary function of identity politics is to advance the interests of privileged sections of a particular, supposedly uniformly "oppressed" identity group, defined on the basis of race, gender or sexuality. Campaigns such as "Decolonise Education" and "Rhodes Must Fall" provide leverage to secure positions and privileges for a privileged few. Equally, the policies of no platforming and safe spaces are tools for pursuing this agenda, allowing a small layer of students with little popular support to dominate campus politics.

This explains why, in an interview published by the *New Statesman*, Shakira Martin could declare that "outrage over free speech on campus is a distraction." Her statement is doubly cynical, given that Martin's path to office was paved by last year's attack on the former president of the NUS, Malia Bouattia.

In a 2011 blog post, Bouattia referred to the Birmingham chapter of the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) as "something of a Zionist outpost," and criticised reporting by "mainstream Zionist-led media outlets" on the Israel-Palestine conflict, for which she was subjected to a media witch-hunt branding her an anti-Semite.

She was targeted not only for her criticisms of Israel and Zionism, but also for her stated opposition to the greatest threat to freedom of speech and political expression on university campuses—the government's Prevent Strategy. Established by Labour in 2003, Prevent serves the dual purpose of scapegoating Muslims in Britain and establishing a framework for the suppression of political opposition under the guise of combating "terrorist radicalization."

As of July 2015, teachers have been legally obliged to report any suspected "extremist" behaviour to police. Civil Rights groups like Liberty, Rights Watch (UK) and the Open Society Justice Initiative have roundly criticised the scheme for its violations of human rights.

A substantial section of the identity politics crowd at universities joined enthusiastically in the media campaign against Bouattia. Grotesquely, Bouattia's defenders countered this by describing her as "politically black" (she is of Algerian descent) and pointing to her leading role in the racist "Why is my curriculum white?" campaign.

In the end, Bouattia was defeated by Martin, who was backed by the Union of Jewish Students and sections of the NUS Black Students Campaign. Martin was hailed by the pseudo-left for being "ethnically black" as opposed to Bouattia's "political blackness." A direct consequence of these de-classed politics has been the advance of right-wing libertarian forces on campuses, which have been able to exploit legitimate hostility among students to such divisive politics and the suppression of free speech.

In the US, Steve Bannon, the fascist founder of *Breitbart News*, boasted "the longer they talk about identity politics, I got 'em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats."

The disaffiliation campaign launched against the NUS last year, resulting in Lincoln, Newcastle, Hull, Loughborough and Surrey universities leaving the union, was led by groups around the Conservative Party who attacked the NUS as a "bastion of the loony left" and as a hotbed of anti-Semitism.

A particularly insidious role has been played by the libertarian right around *Spiked-Online*. Its campaign against censorship on campus—which includes publishing a league table of universities ranked by their commitment to free speech—has been carried out mainly in defence of far-right figures like Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen. The organisation is well connected with forces ranging from the *Guardian* to the *Times* and the *Spectator*, and to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The fraudulent nature of its claim to defend free speech is exposed by its vicious attacks on Julian Assange and Edward Snowden and fanatical support of the “war on terror.”

For socialist policies to defend education and democratic rights

Under conditions where young people are facing a worse standard of living than their parents, poor job opportunities, ruinous debt and decimated social services, the state is looking for any opportunity to strengthen its instruments of repression in expectation of a political radicalisation among students. Besides paving the way for such authoritarian measures, identity politics undermine the ability of students to fight against attacks such as the privatisation of education.

There will be many young people with a genuine desire to change the world for the better who are confused and even repulsed by what is taking place on British university campuses. The fight against such politically retrograde developments must be based on a conscious rejection of what are presented as “left” politics on the campuses in favour of a struggle for socialism. In the propaganda of the various pseudo-left groups, the focus on “identity” issues obscures the significance of class as the fundamental division in society.

Securing good quality public education and the defence of democratic rights on campuses depends on a turn to the working class, as the revolutionary force that can overthrow capitalism, forging the closest political links between students and workers. Those asserting the special oppression of their own identity and the need for special treatment disrupt the potential for a powerful, unified movement of students and workers against austerity, education cuts, privatization, the escalation of imperialist militarism and the accompanying attack on democratic rights by encouraging divisions along race and gender lines.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls on all students and young people who want to defend not only their own rights but to build a society free of poverty, homelessness and the growing threat of war to contact us and take up the fight for genuine socialism.

For further details visit www.iysse.com/#join

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>