

The UK lecturers strike and the struggle against marketisation

Former student sues university for cost of her education

By Thomas Scripps
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There are important lessons for striking lecturers in the case brought by a former student of Anglia Ruskin University, who is suing the UK institution for breach of contract and fraudulent misrepresentation.

The case illustrates how the successful defence of lecturers' pensions cannot be separated off from opposition to the ongoing marketisation of education, as the University and College Union (UCU) is seeking to do.

Graduate Pok Wong is claiming £60,000 compensation—her estimated cost of her university education—on the basis that her degree did not offer the “quality education and prospect of employment after graduation” claimed by the university.

This suit demonstrates the corrosive consequences of students being encouraged to view themselves as consumers entering into contracts with universities for economic advantage. The collective endeavour of learning is replaced by a purely financial and adversarial relationship between two parties, in which each is incentivised to push the other for maximum “cost efficiency.”

In comments to the *Sunday Telegraph*, Wong explained her hopes that the case would “set a precedent so that students can get value for money, and if they don't they get compensated.”

Her comments accept the principles of marketised education and attempt to leverage them for individual students' self-interest. However, Wong has taken an individualistic approach to a very real and difficult situation in which students find themselves—with any prospect of a half-way decent job, out of which accrued debts must be paid, dependent on a good grade from a “respected” university.

Fault does not ultimately lie with her, or any individual student. Wong's case is a product of the reshaping of

higher education into a business model. This process has been carried out for decades under both Conservative and Labour governments, and has been intensified in recent years. While it persists, many more cases of a similar kind can be expected.

Moreover, Anglia Ruskin and other universities have embraced this process, treating their prospectus as an extended advert promising applicants precisely the flower-strewn career path Wong complains she did not receive.

Wong refers in her legal papers to Anglia Ruskin's claim to carry out “world-leading research.” In fact, the university is ranked in the 301st-350th bracket for quality of research by *Times Higher Education*. A number of other institutions have promoted themselves with similar lies or distortions.

Last November, the Advertising Standards Authority watchdog ordered seven universities to change false claims about their status made in advertisements to students. The University of Strathclyde, for example, was told to change its claim, “We're ranked No. 1 in the UK” for physics. Teesside University had to stop calling itself the “Top university in England for long-term graduate prospects.”

Specific instances of misrepresentation are less significant than the motivations driving them. Since the cap was lifted on student numbers and fees, a vicious competition has begun among universities for young people entering higher education and the increasingly large financial hauls they bring with them.

For the 2015-16 academic year, income to the higher education sector totaled £34.7 billion, 48.4 percent of which came from tuition fees—a sizeable section of that from international student fees. Changed reporting methods make detailed year-by-year comparisons

difficult but, whatever the precise statistics, this is a huge leap from the £18.7 billion reported for the 2013-14 year.

A small layer of university leaders and administrators are doing very well out of this increased revenue flow. For them, young people are treated more and more as potentially lucrative assets to be competed for. University spending reflects this assessment. According to research carried out by Bournemouth University in 2013, almost seven in ten Directors of Marketing in UK universities surveyed saw a growth in marketing budgets following the increase in tuition fees. The report suggested the budget rise “seemed indicative of the greater perceived value of university marketing as an ethos.”

That year, replies to freedom of information requests at 70 universities found that they collectively spent more than £36 million on student marketing in 2012-13. This was a rise of 14.7 percent on 2011-12 and 33 percent on 2010-11. Anglia Ruskin was listed as one of a number of institutions, particularly newer ones, whose spending skyrocketed in these years. It spent £1.76 million in 2012-13, about £1 million more than in 2010-11.

Anglia Ruskin is in good company. According to a second set of freedom of information requests in early 2016, University College London spent £2,000,068 on marketing in 2014-2015 and Kingston University spent £1,874,476 in 2015-16. Reading University spent a staggering £2,582,000 in 2013-14. A spokesman commented, “We’re operating in a highly competitive and global market for students.”

By 2016, Anglia Ruskin spoke even more plainly. Following a high-profile university promotion with NME magazine and Reading Festival, Karen Smalley, the university’s head of branding and campaigns, described the situation in higher education as she saw it:

“For too long there has been a little bit of snobbery about how we market universities... we have to talk about what you’re getting for your money. No-one in the university likes to talk about students as consumers, but that’s what they are... Let’s talk about how we position ourselves in a very commercial market...”

There is a close connection between Wong’s claims and the ongoing “compensation campaign” demanding students are recompensed for teaching missed during the UCU lecturers’ strike. The campaign is providing a cover for universities to subvert the strike, in the name of minimising “cost” to students. As with the suit against Anglia Ruskin, the call for compensation reinforces the concept of the student as a consumer—which is at the heart of deteriorating conditions in higher education for

students and university workers alike. This is the reason compensation petitions have been endorsed by numerous Tories, including Universities Minister Sam Gyimah, a longtime advocate for the involvement of the private sector in university education.

Gyimah’s support is of a piece with the Tory party’s whole strategy for undermining higher education. Government attacks in the last few years have increasingly been carried out under the fraudulent auspices of “aiding the cause of students”: from the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2017 allowing for yet higher fees, to the Office for Students (OfS) and higher education review set up recently. In the universities minister’s own words, “Gone are the days when students venerated institutions and were thankful to be admitted. We are in a new age—the age of the student.”

According to the government’s plan, students are to be used as a pressure group for enforcing its marketisation agenda—an agenda with dire consequences for all would-be students as well as higher education in general.

Yet the campaign has been embraced by the UCU and advanced as a means of showing solidarity with lecturers against university management, organized within Universities UK (UUK). Indeed, many students who have signed petitions making this demand will have done so not out of agreement with the government but in an attempt at forging unity with the strikers.

In this, the UCU only confirms the fraudulent nature of its present pose of opposition and its essential unity with the employers and the government against the interests of education workers and students alike.

As the Wong case proves, the enemy cannot be fought by opportunistically seizing on its own weapons, but only by rejecting the entire framework of education marketisation and defending the right to a free and high-quality education through the class struggle and on the basis of a socialist programme.

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