

The Government has been forced on the back foot after the Lords pushed through an amendment to the HE Bill at the start of January that reaffirms what universities are for. This is an important amendment, because it represents the clash of two very different ideological perspectives on the purpose of a university.

The premise of the HE Bill is that a university is a kind of “higher education provider” – like a toothpaste provider. The Government has defined universities in this crass way because it opens the door to private companies swooping in, setting up campuses and charging high tuition fees to students. In the USA this has meant a colossal expansion of what is known as the ‘for-profit’ sector. This is now in decline as a result of **a series of frauds and scandals.**

Although it might sound bland and obvious, stating that “a university must uphold the principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech” makes a big distinction between a university and a private company. If you are a scientist working for a private company and you publish research that is critical of a commercial partner of your employer, you will almost certainly be fired.

Publicly-funded, publicly-accountable science is crucial to **a free society.** The engineering researchers in the US who blew the whistle on Volkswagen were funded by the automobile industry and needed their cooperation to test vehicles. But they found a big discrepancy between the industry’s published figures on emissions and what they saw in the lab. They were able to publish the results because they were protected by the principle of academic freedom – whistle-blowing clauses in their contracts.

After the gold rush

In 2011 the Coalition Government introduced 9K fees, and cut the per-department ‘block grant’ (scrapped it altogether in some subjects). In 2014 they removed the cap on student numbers. This unleashed **a wave of speculative expansion** by existing universities (a ‘gold rush for students’). Universities saw they could expand student numbers, and once they had covered their costs, each extra student recruited was pure profit. They hired staff on short-term contracts and started pouring money into new campuses. The starting gun was fired on a race to the bottom.

This is now placing **extreme strain** within universities. Government-funded research earns the university an additional 80% on top of salaries. But if you do the maths, a teaching staff member costing £50,000 a year teaching 30 students paying £9,000 will earn the university 440% on top. The incentive is clear – push out research-active academics, who “only” bring in 80% of their salaries, and hire teaching staff, expand marketing and building space.

What does this amendment mean?

It is vindication of all of those who have got organised to oppose the Bill.

It should be the start of many amendments to remove other clauses from the HE Bill. These clauses let private companies brand themselves as a University from Day 1, write degree programmes without oversight, etc.

Across our campuses, colleagues should approach the question of organising against the HE Bill and defending Education with renewed vigour.

The NUS has launched their boycott of NSS. Student Unions are open to organising with UCU branches and other trade unions to explain the Bill and the Boycott.

What you can do

- **Organise meetings on campuses and communities.** Our first task is to bring people together who want to do something. We can all circulate the link to the ‘College, Inc.’ video to colleagues, include a link to the HE Convention website, and ask them if they’d like to help organise a meeting about the HE Bill.
- **Invite outside speakers.** If you need a speaker from the Convention, email us or add a comment to the website. Think about whether you want to open the meeting up to a Public Meeting and invite MPs to debate. This can draw a crowd, but you may want to start small and build up to a Public Meeting after the Third Reading.
- **Lobby your local MP in their constituency.** MPs have constituency surgeries. You can arrange to turn up in a large group and ask to speak to the MP about the Bill. It can be powerful to send in a student and a staff member as delegates. But this does not mean you should not try to turn up en masse. Numbers turning up in the constituency help remind MPs that they rely on you for votes. Invite the local press. Target Tory MPs – the votes are on party lines.
- **Support the NUS boycott of NSS.** Make sure your UCU branch is putting out statements in support of the NSS boycott. Talk to the SU. Get staff meetings together to put out statements. For example, some departments at UCL have put out statements saying “normally we would call on all students to participate in the National Student Survey, but the NSS is boycotting it and this is why”. Strengthen the arguments the NUS are using – mostly about tuition fees – with an explanation about the TEF and the HE Bill. See the Convention website for more details.

Solidarity Selfies. Rather than put out a generic poster, we are proposing this activity.

Write an argument against the HE Bill with a marker pen on a piece of paper. Take a photo of yourself holding it up **at work** – in the lab, classroom or office – or outside the college – and **tweet** it with a comment to #stopHEbill #defendHE to @HEconvention @ucu @nus

If you don’t use twitter, get someone you know who does to tweet it for you!