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UK: Protest at scholarship cuts

Germaine Greer joined protests at the British government's decision to cut funds for student scholarships from eight older Commonwealth countries. At a meeting at London's Commonwealth Club, the Australian-born academic and journalist said: "This so-called financial saving amounts to little more than the price of a property in Bayswater, yet its withdrawal will waste untold talent. More and more Australian students will simply study in the US - this has got to be to the detriment of Britain."

Greer was joined by fellow beneficiaries of Commonwealth scholarships Sir George Bain, former vice-chancellor of Queen's University Belfast and Dr Alastair Niven, Principal of Cumberland Lodge, Windsor. They argued the decision ran directly counter to the spirit of pledges made by Prime Minister Gordon Brown at last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Already, 2,000 people have signed and e-petition to the Prime Minister urging him to reconsider the plan.

Foreign Secretary David Miliband announced last March that Britain would terminate its commitment, which began in 1959, to the Commonwealth Scholarship Plan after the next academic year. The decision is part of a £10 million (\$19.9 million) cut in Foreign Office funding for scholarships generally. Current spending on the scheme is £2 million which pays for about 100 Commonwealth Scholarships annually to Australia, Bahamas, Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Malta, New Zealand and Singapore.

Scholarships for study in the UK will now be available only to developing Commonwealth countries although the office will still support a nominal but declining number of awards for Commonwealth citizens through its global Chevening awards programme. Commonwealth countries will have no special status in this and none of the eight countries losing Commonwealth Scholarships is on the FCO's priority list for the Chevening scheme.

Protesters say the decision undermines other areas of government policy, including the Prime Minister's initiative to promote more internationalisation in higher education, and argue that it is clear that other key government departments were not consulted in advance of the announcement. They point out that it also means that a brand that has produced thousands of influential friends for Britain will be unnecessarily discarded.

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