

HEFUNDING

The campaign to defend funds for lifelong learning continues;
PAULA LANNING, national head of communications and public affairs, reports

ELQs – prepare for a long campaign

It is likely that if we had explicitly asked whether respondents agreed we should remove funding for ELQs [students studying at a level equivalent to or below a qualification they already hold], we would have received a negative response.' This little-publicised statement can be found in a report to the HE Funding Council board on its consultation on implementing the £100 million cut in funding for a huge swathe of second-time HE qualification students. It mirrors responses to the recent select committee inquiry, where only seven of 478 submissions supported the policy, according to chair, Phil Willis MP.

Completely out of the blue, last September ministers instructed the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to phase out £100 million worth of funding for ELQ student places. Over the next three years, the plan is to 'shift' that funding from such student places to first-time applicants.

The campaign to reverse the ill-judged decision has hotted up. Working in an alliance including the National Union of Students and the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, UCU nationally – and locally – has been spelling out the potential impact of the cuts on courses, students and lifelong learning. Government is said to have been taken aback by the breadth and vehemence of opposition.

Following a well-attended briefing in Westminster convened by UCU, and an approach to the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee, the committee announced a short inquiry into the ELQ decision. Giving evidence alongside the vice-chancellors of Birkbeck and Open

University and the president of NUS, general secretary Sally Hunt argued against counterposing one group of students against another, and explained the financial impact on a large number of institutions. Replying to a question from former university lecturer Ian Gibson MP as to why the education minister was isolated on this, she quipped: 'Because he's wrong.'

The government's rationale is that teaching such students is not usually as high a priority for public funding as support for first-time students or those progressing to higher qualifications. It hopes employer cash will make up some of the funding shortfall. Some routes to re-skilling, such as foundation degrees, are being protected, and minister Bill Rammell told the committee the list of protected subjects would be reviewed annually.

But, as Gemma Tumelty of NUS said: 'There's no evidence that those who don't have degrees are being pushed out by those who are furthering and re-skilling' (a point backed up by OU vice-chancellor Brenda Gourley).

It was also pointed out that there are no obligations on employers to fund such courses, some ELQ students are trying to change employers, and some are working for a number of employers – so relying on employer funding is very high risk. Presumably, the commitment to cutting £100 million means any additional protected subject would have to be balanced with a removal.

As Sally Hunt said in a *Guardian* article, the widening participation agenda will be very badly hit by the changes, and women and older

potential learners will suffer most. And the jobs of staff who teach the courses affected will be under threat.

Just before the oral evidence session on ELQs the Tories called an adjournment debate based on an early day motion opposing the ELQ

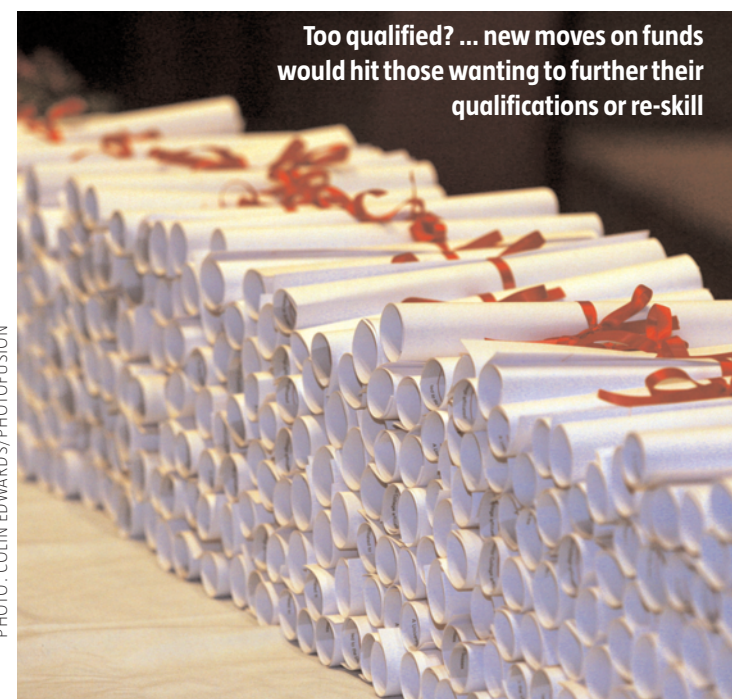


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Too qualified? ... new moves on funds would hit those wanting to further their qualifications or re-skill

measure, which had attracted 211 signatures. While there were some excellent speeches, such devices have the effect of cohering support for government positions, so the motion went down with 238 for and 291 against, and the early day motion was then frozen.

All the signs now are that government will hold firm, and that we're in for a long campaign. As *UC* went to press, we awaited the report of the select committee and, we hope, that should provide another opportunity for a push with decision-makers.

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