

Thursday 2 April 2020

Dear Mr Williamson,

Future of further and higher education

I am writing on behalf of 120,000 staff who work in post-16 education, including those employed in higher education, further education, adult education and prison education.

These sectors have always been a critical part of the social and economic fabric of the UK and will be crucial to our country's recovery from the damage done by the Covid-19 crisis.

Staff in the sector have already responded magnificently, shifting within a matter of days to online teaching in order to support millions of students and continuing to produce ground breaking research aimed at beating or mitigating the virus.

Yet the current crisis is now itself creating huge financial uncertainty in post-16 education. Unless urgent action is taken by government we risk losing vital academic capacity across the system at just the time when it will be needed most.

The sector needs a clear and coherent government plan aimed at retaining capacity and maximising the positive impact that further and higher education can make upon recovery.

I would like to propose action by the government in seven key areas in order to address this crisis:

1. Underwriting present funding levels

The next academic year will unquestionably be hugely challenging for universities and colleges with tuition fee income likely to be significantly below expectation.

There is likely to be a significant, short-term drop in international demand for higher education; [analysis by London Economics](#) has shown that a 1% decline in GDP would correspond to a 0.49% reduction in overseas demand for UK HE at undergraduate level. Similarly, a 1% decrease in the energy price index could result in a 0.38% drop in demand for undergraduate UK HE from overseas.

Domestic student demand at HE and FE institutions is also likely to be substantially damaged in the short to medium term both by the extended standstill of the economy and the uncertainty that besets both the pre and post 16 sectors. Yet longer-term demographic trends suggest we will need additional capacity in higher education in the coming years: [analysis by HEPi](#) suggests that changing UK demography will lead to demand for an additional 50,000 domestic undergraduate places by 2030. A loss of capacity caused by lack of funding would impact on the longer-term ability of the sector to accommodate this additional demand.

Further and adult education providers are also currently unable to deliver as normal, and are set to lose significant funding in the short-term due to non-delivery as a result of closures. The [Association of Colleges has estimated](#) that the average college will lose between £500,000 and £1m per month while the current restrictions are in place. The ESFA has confirmed that it will continue to pay grant funding for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year and that apprenticeship funding will continue where delivery can be continued remotely, but the government should go further in providing financial support to ensure that colleges which are unable to function as normal in the short-term can maintain their capacity for future delivery.

UCU is calling on the government to make a firm commitment to maintain income at its current levels in all publicly funded post-16 institutions, at both the English and devolved government levels. This should include the additional commitments already recently made by government to provide extra support for further education and for research funding.

Without this guarantee from government, vital academic and educational capacity will be lost at just the moment when it is needed to help increase skills, drive economic growth and reduce inequality.

2. Restriction of competition and a focus on the wider interest

UCU has been a strong critic of the increased marketisation of post-16 education in recent years. We are concerned that it has driven unintended behaviour as institutions have rushed to attract students, leading to higher spending on [marketing](#) and [ancillary services](#) than institutions in many competitor nations.

However, whatever the merits or otherwise of the policy, there is little doubt that in the context of the current crisis competition between and within the university and college sectors is both wasteful and unproductive.

While there is currently debate about whether to reintroduce an institutional cap on student recruitment in HE in England, in an atmosphere where domestic and international demand is likely to have substantially fallen, implementing a cap is likely to have only a limited impact at best in ensuring that colleges (which provide around 10% of HE in England) and universities remain financially sustainable.

What is needed is further, comprehensive action from government. In return for the government underwriting institutional funding at current levels, **institutions should be required to work cooperatively together across higher and further education to benefit both students and the wider national interest.**

This should include:

- collaboration in order to enable affected students to conclude their studies;
- working across FE and HE boundaries to play a coherent anchoring role in local communities;

- reaching sector wide agreement on arrangements for the timing and character of the resumption of teaching in the new academic year; and
- pooling and sharing research capacity where there is a wider strategic interest in doing so.

3. Exams, admissions and protection of students

There is currently great uncertainty about the future, both among those who are currently students in further and higher education and those of school age who are contemplating further study. There is enormous skill and energy behind the unprecedented shift online by staff in FE and HE and it has substantial social benefits for students who are now in social isolation. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that attempts to hold exams and other assessments on a 'business as usual' basis will have profound consequences for the fairness and equality of the process.

While staff across the education system have been working hard to shift delivery online, the National Union of Students (NUS) has [highlighted significant barriers](#) to access which mean many students may not be able to engage effectively with alternative methods of delivery, including:

- a lack of access to specialist equipment
- lack of suitable facilities and support for disabled students' learning
- unreliable broadband connection
- censorship of material in the countries of origin of some international students
- mental health impacts of social distancing and self-isolation
- additional caring responsibilities

Many of these barriers are also currently being faced by further and higher education staff. These complex challenges need proper thought, informed by the expert staff who are best placed to identify appropriate approaches.

With the trajectory of the pandemic still unclear, UCU is concerned that overambitious plans to resume operations in the autumn will mislead potential students into believing a return to normal operations is imminent. This lack of clear and transparent information is particularly relevant given the substantial lifetime financial investment now required in order to access student loans in HE and FE.

The continued unseemly competition between institutions to attract students even at a time of such great uncertainty adds further evidence to the case for government to take the lead. We believe that government needs to be as clear as possible about the options that these groups will have once the virus is contained. The government should also act to ensure that students who wish to repeat courses or modules that have been significantly disrupted as a result of the current situation are not subject to additional fee costs.

Only a real partnership between all stakeholders of the type [recently agreed in the railway industry](#) will give students the clarity and certainty they need. **UCU proposes that the government urgently convene a group of representatives from institutions, examination**

bodies, practitioner unions and student organisations with the aim of agreeing clear and appropriate pathways for all learners and students in light of the current situation.

4. Protecting existing academic and institutional capacity

Further and higher education institutions across the UK rely heavily on staff employed on insecure contracts. Around 70% of researchers in HE are employed on fixed-term contracts, while 37,000 teaching staff are employed on a similarly non-permanent basis and a further 71,000 teachers are employed as 'atypical academics' with no fixed hours.

Of the 51,720 teaching staff working in FE colleges, 18.5% are on a fixed-term contract, 25% are hourly paid and 4.5% are employed through an agency. In further education, 66 colleges deliver more than half of their teaching using staff on precarious contracts.

These staff are bearing the brunt of the financial uncertainty now facing the sector. Even those whose income is partially protected in the short term due to the national furlough initiatives announced by the government will face an uncertain future should student numbers collapse in the short term.

UCU has already written to the Head of UKRI asking for them to lead by example in promoting security for fixed term researchers reaching the end of their contract during the pandemic. We were disappointed to receive very little in response which would enable us to reassure such staff who represent our country's academic future.

Acting proactively to support the huge army of casualised staff in FE and HE is not just sensible for powerful educational reasons, but also because it would retain substantial capacity within our institutions which will inevitably be required in the future. The country can ill afford to see thousands of highly qualified teachers, researchers and professional support staff thrown onto the dole at a time when education will be a key driver of recovery.

More generally, UCU is already aware of a number of high profile institutions who are considering reducing provision in response to the crisis. However, these kind of short-term reactions will have long-term consequences. The loss of any academic capacity at a local or regional level is hugely expensive to replace and - where no local alternative then exists - creates powerful disincentives for potential students. The same is true if cuts are made to essential support services within institutions that would make it harder for institutions to resume their normal functioning in the future.

In this vein, it is also important to provide additional security to the many thousands of international staff who are currently facing significant uncertainty – often combined with concerns about the welfare of family members in other affected countries - as a result of this crisis. The revised Home Office guidance confirming that visa monitoring should be suspended at the current time is helpful, as is the extension of visas for those unable to travel, but we would urge the government to go further in providing reassurance to all

international staff and students in higher education that they will not be disadvantaged as a result of the current crisis.

Due to the current disruption, many students may opt to continue or repeat their 2019/20 study programme into the next academic year and this will need to be properly resourced both in funding terms and by having staff ready and able to deliver. A significant number of the 2019/20 student cohort in post 16 Education may need to access extra bespoke support when institutions return to traditional delivery methods and this will need to be facilitated by staff who are still employed and ready to provide that support.

A failure to protect both current course provision and the employment of our most vulnerable staff would have a significant impact on future delivery capacity for both teaching and research.

We believe the government should:

- **urgently confirm that their furlough arrangements should apply to all staff currently employed within the sector, including those on all forms of insecure contract**
- **ask UKRI to step up and lead the wider research community by extending research grants to support the retention of staff, at least until such time as the pandemic is under control and normal working is possible again.**
- **In the longer term, commission a review of the extensive casualisation of further and higher education which threatens the sustainability of these important sectors.**
- **Extend the one-year visa extension scheme being offered to NHS staff to all current visa holders**

5. Protection against university and college closure

Since its inception the OfS has said that it will not rescue HE institutions in financial difficulties. Similarly, the government's focus with regard to FE has been to promote cost cutting and mergers rather than offer long term financial support.

Colleges and universities are not only important to our national economic success, they have a vitally important role in the economic and civic life of towns and cities across the UK. They directly employ over half a million staff, and [research by Universities UK](#) has shown that for every 100 jobs created by a university, 117 are created in the wider local economy. A [regional analysis](#) of the economic benefits of universities has shown that they bring significant economic benefits to English regions, producing between 2.6% and 3.8% of total regional Gross Value Added (GVA) in each region. [Research by the 157 Group](#) has suggested that further education colleges each have a positive economic benefit for their local region to the tune of £550m.

However, the critical importance of post-16 institutions not just to the national recovery but also to local economies that rely on their local FE and HE institutions means that a different approach must be taken. **The government must be prepared to act to ensure that no HE or**

FE institution goes to the wall. Only by doing this will regional academic capacity be retained at existing levels, and meaningful student choice maintained for students in all parts of the UK. Making such a commitment public would be a powerful signal to the sector and to potential students that the government will stand behind it.

6. Reducing bureaucracy and allowing time for teaching, research and public engagement

Further and higher education staff have shown their capacity to innovate in the past few weeks, for example, by moving their teaching online and refocusing their research and practice towards Covid-19 activity. However, the current bureaucratic framework of Ofsted, REF and TEF constrains rather than facilitates innovations in teaching, research and public engagement, and reflects a competitive model of further and higher education which is no longer fit-for-purpose in dealing with the challenges posed by Covid-19.

Although the postponement of REF 2021 and the suspension of Ofsted inspections is welcome, **we call for these – and other unhelpful forms of institutional assessment and metrics-driven exercises such as the TEF – to be cancelled on a long-term basis.**

A further relaxation of the current assessment framework in further and higher education would free up time for staff to focus on supporting their students, developing their skills in the use of new technology and building links with local communities.

7. Expansion of lifelong learning opportunities

Delivering an economic recovery from the crisis will require an expansion of existing plans to increase everyone's skills. Around [7% of working age adults in England do not possess any qualifications](#), while research by the [Social Mobility Commission](#) has shown that almost half of people (49%) from the lowest social grades had not undertaken any learning since they have left school, and participation in adult learning has been declining since 2010-11.

The government needs to develop a properly resourced lifelong learning policy which focuses on reversing the huge cuts in adult participation in education over the past twenty years. Such an expansion will not just be economically beneficial but will also help to support those who have borne the brunt of the current crisis.

I believe that it is critical to the post-16 education sector that government sets out a clear plan in the seven areas identified and I would welcome the chance to discuss this with you further.

Yours sincerely,



Jo Grady
General Secretary
University and College Union