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Building a fair and sustainable post-school education system: priorities for the next government

UCU

University and College Union

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Introduction

Education is transformative – both for individuals and for wider society. Learning broadens our horizons, while improving our wellbeing and our productivity. It is a long-term investment in our economy, it is vital to our employers, and it will shape the future for everyone.

Now more than ever, the people we teach and support to learn are the people who will help the world respond to shared global crises. They will help find a way through the social justice and equality challenges we face. They will support the health and wellbeing of an aging population. They will develop our approach to living and working with Artificial Intelligence and our response to the increasing damage caused by climate change.

Any barriers which make accessing education too difficult for some simply cap our potential to respond to these challenges. Any conditions which harm the experience of those in education, whether staff or students, will only put limits on our ability to navigate our way through the shared challenges we face.

After the damage caused by more than a decade of real-terms cuts and marketisation, this manifesto outlines a series of proposals for radical reform, underpinned by a set of key principles, to ensure that we have an education system that works for everyone. We urge politicians to work with the University and College Union (UCU) to build on this vision.



Five principles for a fairer post-school education system

- 1 Education must be funded fairly and sustainably**
- 2 Regulation must be an enabler of excellence, not a barrier to it**
- 3 Good working conditions result in excellent outcomes for staff and students**
- 4 Fairness and inclusion must be at the heart of our education system and our society**
- 5 Professional autonomy in the education sector must be supported and respected**



Principle 1:

Education must be funded fairly and sustainably

How should we do this?

- Scrap tuition fees to remove cost as a barrier to education
- Employers, not students, should contribute most to the cost of building a skilled workforce
- Ensure funding is fair across all parts of the sector, and that national bargaining works for staff
- Fully fund the increased Teachers' Pension Fund (TPS) costs

Scrap tuition fees to remove cost as a barrier to education

Education is a public good, which should be publicly funded. The costs of education should never be a barrier to learning, but while public funding for post-16 education continues to lag behind the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, the cost of tuition is at an all-time high, student maintenance support has failed to keep up with the rising cost of living and students in further education are increasingly forced into debt to fund their studies.

The financial gap is being paid for by students through tuition fees, and by university and college staff through declining pay and working conditions. We need a fundamental change in how education is funded which ensures that students and staff are the priority.

The next government must review education funding, starting with scrapping tuition fees and improving student maintenance support.



Employers, not students, should bear the cost of building a skilled workforce

Despite being the main beneficiaries of an educated workforce, employers are not currently expected to contribute significantly towards the cost of higher education. At the same time, they pay the lowest rate of corporation tax of any country in the G7.

Research by London Economics for UCU has shown that **affordable reform is possible**¹. A 3% rise in corporation tax, or just a 1% rise in employer national insurance contributions for graduate employees, could provide a practical route for money to fund education, relieving the pressure on students and institutions, while ensuring employers are paying their fair share. An employer higher education levy would ensure sustainable funding for the higher education sector, while also ensuring that those who benefit most from the cost of building a skilled workforce are the ones who pay for it.

The next government should ensure employers are paying their fair share of the cost of building a skilled workforce, through implementing an employer higher education levy.

Ensure education funding is fair across all parts of the sector

We need to ensure all parts of the education system are funded fairly and sustainably for the future. Needless competition and arbitrary measures of quality have created an unevenly funded post-16 education sector with widespread uncertainty. The removal of controls on student numbers in higher education, as part of a government objective to privatise and marketise education, has resulted in unpredictability, with harms for staff and students alike. Under-recruitment in some places results in course closures, job losses, and a lack of choice for students, while over-recruitment in others results in overcrowded learning environments, a stretch on resources and overworked staff. This risks creating geographical cold spots for education which could have a particularly damaging impact on students from less advantaged backgrounds, and disabled students who are less able to relocate for study.

These issues have been deepened by the change in employer contributions to the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) which have increased by up to 5% since April, meaning employers are having to foot bigger bills, with contributions going directly to the UK Treasury. This means that vital funds are being redirected out of an already under-funded sector. The UK government has refused to fund the increase for higher education and some adult community education (ACE) providers in the same way that it is funding schools and colleges – taking away funds that could otherwise be used to benefit students, staff and their communities.



In further education, a decade of cuts has seen a precipitous decline in the pay and conditions of teachers, with a growing gap of over £9,000 between the pay of school and college teachers. A lack of binding national bargaining means that even the meagre pay recommendations made in recent years have not been implemented by many employers. This is causing significant problems with recruitment and retention in colleges, ultimately impacting negatively on students.

Spending on adult and community education (ACE) has also seen repeated cuts since 2010, meaning that even with recent cash injections to level up poorer areas of the country, government spending is still 23% lower than it was in 2010, and 40% lower for classroom-based learning specifically. 76% of ACE tutors are on insecure employment contracts and are effectively paid below the minimum wage due to overworking.

Educators treated as second rate employees on second rate contracts will never be equipped to deliver a standard of education that students and our society need. It is not what they or we deserve.

A new, strategic approach to funding is needed – not only to address these existing inequities, but also to ensure that the post-school education sector is strategically placed to support the nation in meeting the challenges posed by technological advances and the transition to net zero.

The next government must:

- **urgently review the funding model and implement a fair model for student distribution between higher education institutions**
- **close the pay gap between school and further education college teaching staff, and implement binding national bargaining**
- **review pay and working conditions in adult and community education**
- **urgently rethink the disastrous position on TPS funding and fund rises affecting higher education and adult and community education (ACE)**
- **establish a Just Transition Commission for Post-16 Education to develop a national post-16 strategy to transition to net-zero.**



Principle 2:

Regulation and funding must be an enabler of excellence, not a barrier to it

How should we do this?

- **Overhaul higher education regulation and scrap the flawed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF)**
- **Reform Ofsted and replace inspections with a peer-led improvement model**

Overhaul higher education regulation and scrap the flawed Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework (REF)

Formed in 2018 as part of the government's sweeping reforms to embed competition within the higher education sector, the Office for Students has since proved woefully ineffective and has failed to gain the confidence of either students or providers. A priority for the new government must be to overhaul the regulation arrangements for the sector in a way that truly centres the voices and interests of students and staff.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is deeply unpopular and is failing students as a poor proxy for quality. Despite this, institutional efforts are directed disproportionately towards measuring against its arbitrary metrics, at the expense of a focus on delivering an excellent education.

Research in our universities is under strain due to the declining unit of resource for teaching as well as falling success rates for research grants. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) ingrains inequality, discourages innovation and represents a drain on the time and resources of staff.



Instead, we need an enabling peer review model which supports teaching and research at all levels, underpinned by a funding model which provides greater stability and reduced bureaucracy for teaching as well as ambitious and cutting-edge research. The next government should explore innovative models for sustainably financing research such as universal basic research funding.

We call on the next government to scrap TEF and plans for REF 2029 and to consider new approaches to funding and regulation, including exploration of universal basic research funding for academics.

Replace Ofsted inspections with a peer-led improvement model

“The Ofsted system of inspections is fatally flawed... It must change.”
Professor Julia Waters, sister of Ruth Perry, NEU Annual Conference, April 2024

In January 2023, the education sector, and the whole country, was shocked and saddened by the death of a devoted head teacher, Ruth Perry. An inquest found that an Ofsted inspection contributed to her death, with reference to conduct during the inspection itself and to failings of the current Ofsted system at large. The coroner noted that unless action is taken, future deaths could occur. It is a tragedy that it has taken Ruth's death for the concerns of the profession to be heard, and yet no change has been forthcoming.

Like school teachers, UCU members in further education have grave concerns about the stress, anxiety and adverse health impacts associated with Ofsted inspections that have often been described as ‘traumatic’. Educators in all contexts should be able to work in a supportive environment, focused on development that encourages collaboration, knowledge exchange and consensus building.

UCU is calling for Ofsted inspections in further education to be reformed and replaced by a peer-led improvement model, led by the sector and co-designed with key stakeholders, to ensure that reviews are valued and trusted by staff, students, parents/carers and the wider population. We join our sister union the National Education Union in calling for Ofsted reform.

We urge the next government to implement a safe and supportive, peer-led model of inspections in further education, and to abolish Ofsted inspections.



Principle 3:

Good working conditions result in excellent outcomes for staff and students

How should we do this?

- Repeal anti-trade union legislation
- Treat postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as staff
- End the commissioning cycle in prison education
- End the endemic casualisation in post-16 education

Repeal anti-trade union laws

Unfair working conditions have been paired with hostility towards trade unions from the current government in a transparent aim to silence working people. Instead of engaging constructively with people who just want to be able to work to the best of their ability, in safe and fair environments, the government has made laws which stifle the voices of working people and reduce their capacity to push for improved working lives. Such a flagrant attack on our democracy should be of concern to us all.

A well performing education sector can only be achieved if the conditions to enable it are in place. Staff who are overworked, underpaid or working in dangerous, unsafe environments, cannot work to the best of their ability. Laws which prevent people challenging these conditions are damaging both to individual staff and to the health of our public services, including education. The unworkable minimum service levels proposals and wider anti-trade union laws must be scrapped.

The next government must repeal these dangerous and undemocratic anti-trade union laws.



Treat postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as members of staff

Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are the backbone of the higher education sector and represent the future of the workforce in research, industry, and the wider economy. They do the same work as university staff without the reward, recognition, protections and pay, and, as a result, they are often forced to endure **low incomes²** and marginalisation within their institutions.

The UK PhD system continues to fall behind that of other European nations, in which PGRs are legally recognised as university staff. As **UCU's own research³** demonstrates, an incoming government needs to make a number of changes to ensure that postgraduate research is made accessible, equitable and beneficial to all stakeholders.

In particular, work is needed to bring about a fairer system for disabled, migrant, and **Black PGRs⁴**, in addition to those with caring responsibilities. This requires collaboration across government departments, for instance, to ensure that postgraduate researchers can access childcare benefit or are not subjected to restrictive student visas, which are not fit for purpose.

Without a better deal, the UK's postgraduate research system will be held back.

The next government must ensure that universities stop exploiting the expertise of PGR students and recognise them as full members of staff.

End the commissioning cycle in prison education

Education is central to the successful rehabilitation of offenders, but under the current outsourcing model, prisoner education is being delivered by private providers, on a for-profit basis. New contracts are commissioned every four to five years, resulting in unstable employment for teachers, while the provision itself is more focused on retaining the contract than on delivering high-quality education in a safe and supportive environment. Pay for prison educators lags behind that of similarly educated teachers in the wider further education sector and UCU research shows that two thirds of staff in prisons report feeling unsafe.

Too many offenders can't access the qualifications that employers value, while teachers in prisons face limited job security, poor pay and unsafe working environments. Investment is needed to ensure prisoners can leave custody ready to enter the workplace, and that prison education is seen as a safe, viable and attractive career option for the next generation of teachers.

The next government must:

- **replace the commissioning model with a longer term, secure offer, overseen by the Department for Education**
- **introduce a national contract for prison educators with transparent pay and conditions that are in line with the wider further education sector**
- **review safety and protections for those working in prison education.**

End the endemic casualisation in post-16 education

Across post-16 education, job insecurity is a significant problem which has a real impact not only on employee wellbeing, but on the quality of the education experience for students. At the heart of education reform must be a fundamental shift towards more secure employment for all staff in colleges, universities and adult education settings.

The next government must take action to eradicate zero hours contracts and introduce measures to make secure, permanent employment the norm.



Principle 4:

Fairness and inclusion must be at the heart of our education system and our society

How should we do this?

- Commit to meaningful action on equality
- Make university admissions fairer
- Create a welcoming environment for international students and staff

Commit to meaningful action on equality and inclusion

The current government has used the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda to sow division, with those highlighting structural inequalities and calling for progressive change dismissively branded 'woke'. We have seen relentless attacks on trans rights, and an insulting lack of action in addressing the concerns of disabled people and Black communities.

The next government must recognise that equality is central to a fairer education system, and ensuring every citizen has access to the educational opportunities which help meet their learning and career aspirations will only benefit our economy and our society. It must also ensure that equality is central to our approaches to dealing with wider challenges facing our society – for example the rise of Artificial Intelligence or the climate emergency.

Action is also needed to improve transparency on pay and conditions, and to close pay gaps across post-16 education which remain stubbornly high. The mean **gender pay gap in higher education sits at 11.9%**⁵ with some individual institutions reporting gaps **as high as 41%**⁶. The disability pay gap in higher education is 10.3%.



The next government must:

- **commit to implementing all aspects of the Equality Act, including the socio-economic duty**
- **take action to fully implement the recommendations of the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People**
- **implement wider equality pay gap reporting.**

Make university admissions fairer

UCU has led calls for a move to a **post-qualification admissions (PQA) process**⁷ since 2015. Our ground-breaking research has: demonstrated the student and staff desire for this move; highlighted the poor reliability and validity of the current predicted grade model that is used to support entry into higher education; and designed a system to boost information, advice and guidance and allow students to apply to higher education after they have received their final grades. We believe that with the necessary political commitment, investment, time and innovation it is possible to introduce a post-qualification admissions (PQA) system and give students the power to fully control their journey into HE.

The next government should commit to a move to a post-qualification admissions for higher education entry.

Create a welcoming environment for international students and staff

UK colleges and universities have always been international institutions, enhanced by the contributions of thousands of migrant staff and students. The opportunity to meet and learn from people from all over the world is one of the things that has made UK education so valuable, but the government's relentless anti-immigration rhetoric undermines the attractiveness of our education system to international students and staff. This has been made worse by recent rises to earnings thresholds, visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), as well as restrictions on students' ability to bring family members with them to the UK. The government also requires complicity in its approach from educators, who must monitor visa compliance at the expense of time spent delivering a quality education.



The next government must:

- remove the requirement for educators to participate in visa monitoring
- reduce the cost of visas and the Immigration Health Surcharge and reverse rises in minimum earnings thresholds
- remove restrictions on students who wish to bring family members to the UK during their studies.



Principle 5:

Professional autonomy in the education sector must be supported and respected

How should we do this?

- Ensure robust protections for academic freedom
- Build a culture of staff and student engagement at all levels

Ensure robust protections for academic freedom

Academic freedom is a fundamental value of post-school education, one which provides the basis for the quality and integrity of teaching and research. Unfortunately, in recent years we have seen increased government interference, monitoring and meddling in the higher and further education sectors, while freedoms to teach and research have been further eroded by marketisation and managerialism. Widespread job insecurity means educators are less empowered to speak truth to power and exercise their academic freedom. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act does nothing to protect against these threats.

The next government must ensure that there are robust protections for academic freedom, including to prevent government interference.

Build a culture of staff and student engagement at all levels

As sweeping reforms and a culture of marketisation have continued to impact the UK education sector over the last decade or more, a clear theme has emerged: nobody is happy with them. So why have they happened, and who was consulted?

It is clear to UCU, other trade unions and organisations such as the National Union of Students (NUS) that a lack of engagement with staff and students as key stakeholders has resulted in unworkable decisions which negatively impact the most marginalised.



By the same token, these poorly thought-out reforms create quick policy decisions within institutions that affect workloads, cause job losses, and harm the student experience, often with minimal engagement with students and staff.

If we want decisions to reflect the needs of students and be deliverable and sustainable by institutions, we have to ensure that the key stakeholders have a voice at sector and institutional level.

Educators and the professional services staff who support the work of our education institutions are professionals who deserve autonomy and respect. It is time our system reflected that.

The next government must implement robust models of staff and student engagement in policy decisions, and require the same of institutions.

References

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³ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12883/UCU---Getting-a-better-deal-for-PGRS---summary/pdf/PGRs_summary_report_Dec22.pdf

⁴ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8633/BME-doctoral-students-perceptions-of-an-academic-career/pdf/JA_BME_doc_students_report_Jun17.pdf

⁵ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/higher-education-policy-institute-hepi-show-me-money-exploration-gender-pay-gap#:~:text=At%2Da%2Dglance%3A,is%204%20percentage%20points>

⁶ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/03/14/gender-pay-gap-data/#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20the%20higher%20education,cent%20and%2041%20per%20cent>

⁷ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11967/Post-qualification-admissions>

