

Letter for Publication – the Guardian

Life-long learning agenda undermined

We warmly welcome Gordon Brown's commitment to education and lifelong learning but we are puzzled as to why, without consultation, the Government announced that from 2008 universities and colleges in England will lose £100M of public funding for the teaching of students studying for qualifications equivalent to, or lower than, qualifications (ELQs) for which they have previously received an award.

Ministers say they want to spend the money on widening HE participation and the Leitch agenda but this announcement will impact adversely on both. The modern labour market requires up-skilling *and* re-skilling. ELQ students are the very ones re-training, updating professional skills and accessing the lifelong learning which the Prime Minister and Lord Leitch espoused.

Institutions will have their teaching grant reduced on the basis of incomplete data and for students recruited in 2005 – a retrospective fine if ever there was one. Some exemptions are proposed but the logic of publicly funding veterinary science but not pharmacy, psychology and charity accountancy escapes us.

ELQ students pay the same fees as other home UK students. Many study part-time and have family and work commitments. When public funding is scrapped, universities will have no option but to treat these students like international students – and British residents with an overseas qualification awarded years ago but who have not previously accessed UK higher education will also be charged the same fees as international students.

Widespread 'unintended consequences' are likely, particularly in relation to widening participation. Significant numbers of adults will discontinue their lifelong learning because they cannot afford it. Their withdrawal will make large tracts of university continuing education unviable - often in the very institutions criticised for not doing enough to widen participation. The complex additional bureaucracy flies in the face of the Government's own ambition to reduce the burden of regulation in HE.

The Funding Council's consultation is restricted to implementation but broadening exemptions won't solve the problems. With no public consultation on the principle, no evidence-base on the outcome and a real danger of damage to the lifelong learning agenda, the sensible way forward

is for Ministers to defer implementation in 2008 and refer this policy to the 2009 Fees Commission for the proper scrutiny which it deserves.

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