

Response to the DIUS consultation paper on Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value. Rather than responding to all the specific questions in the consultation paper, we would like to focus on the key areas for UCU members, particularly the proposals to bolster employer ‘demand-led’ higher education.

The UCU is supportive of efforts to increase higher level skills within the current and future workforces. However, we have concerns about the narrow emphasis on employer-led skills, particularly in relation to cofunded programmes and two-year ‘flexible’ honours degrees. To summarise, UCU is concerned that ‘employer-led’ higher education is creating:

- a potentially unstable funding environment;
- a narrowing of the curriculum and research base;
- inequality of provision and a narrowing of access to education, reinforcing social segregation.
- the conditions for the continued and faster growth of privatisation in our sector.

While UCU members are happy to collaborate with employers in their role as researchers, lecturers, computing staff, librarians and administrators, they did not enter academia to generate profits for private companies. We are concerned that the ‘business facing’ agenda seeks to turn university staff into the teaching and research arm of employers.

Instead, we consider it is of great importance that higher education institutions are allowed flexibility and autonomy in how they interact with business and the community; that social engagement is considered as valid as economic engagement; and that institutions guard against the commercialisation of knowledge restricting academic freedom.

The case for high level skills

The UCU is supportive of efforts to increase higher level skills within the current and future workforces. Alongside this we have been longstanding supporters of the drive to widen participation in higher education. However, we have two major concerns about the direction of the Government's higher level skills strategy.

First, there is a need to rebalance the aims of the skills agenda to include the broader educational, social and cultural needs of a diverse and complex range of adults. This requires a social partnership which includes educators and communities who can help to deliver the strategy. In both further and higher education, DIUS is currently confusing the educational needs of the public with the short-term skills needs of employers. Funding is increasingly being concentrated on courses and qualifications for employers to the exclusion of broader skills for people's development. Of course we need a highly trained adult workforce for the future, but higher education and skills are not just about work – they contribute towards the development of an intellectually healthy and culturally rich society. The wider benefits of learning such as improved health and wellbeing, community safety, civic engagement and social cohesion have been identified by Government-funded research.¹ Unfortunately, many of the current policies in post-16 education, such as withdrawing funding for ESOL and ELQ provision, jeopardise the Government's own priorities on social cohesion and improved health and wellbeing. UCU would like to see more emphasis on the wider benefits of learning in the higher level skills strategy rather than merely a footnote as is currently the case (paragraph 2.6).

Second, while upskilling can play an important role in promoting individual prosperity, it is wrong to see it as a universal panacea for a range of social and economic problems. In the words of Professor Ewart Keep: "Better education will not, on its own, magic away current labour market structures, large swathes of low paid jobs, or limited levels of demand for more skilled labour." As a result, the UCU shares the view that "there is an urgent need for a more open and honest debate about what skills can contribute as part of wider strategies to help improve economic performance and deliver social justice. Education and training has a role to play, but its nature, scope and relationship with other policies needs a lot more thought".² Debate on the future social and economic needs of the country requires a genuine partnership involving trade unions, employers and government, not simply one based on the needs of the CBI.

¹The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL)

<http://www.learningbenefits.net/Index.htm>

²Ewart Keep (2007) Skills and economic and social justice, SKOPE Issues Paper 16.

Equivalent or lower qualifications

We would also like to flag up inconsistencies in the Government's current approach to higher level skills. For example, despite the Government's rhetorical advocacy of lifelong learning, the new policy of withdrawing funding support for all those learners studying for an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) will reduce dramatically the numbers of adult learners in the system. It is difficult to reconcile the ELQ funding withdrawal with Lord Leitch's call 'to increase the higher education sector's focus on workforce development' and to encourage HEIs 'to collaborate with employers in delivering training that meet employers' needs'. This is because many of the threatened ELQ programmes focus on national and regional priorities for retraining and upskilling adults. Coventry University, for example, is very concerned about the 'negative impact on courses in management' especially as 'improved management competence' is the 'top priority for the Regional Skills Partnership under the RDA'. Similarly, cultural regeneration has been vital to the revival of the North East economy and yet the ELQ cuts threaten Sunderland University's lifelong learning programmes with more than 40 cultural partners.³ We are bitterly disappointed at the Government's response to the House of Commons Committee report on ELQs and urge DIUS to restore ELQ funding in 2009.

Employer 'demand-led' provision

The UCU is opposed to what we see as the marketisation and creeping privatisation of higher education. We think that the interests of our members, of the students and parents who are at the heart of education and of the wider society we serve, are best served by an education system that is funded and controlled by the public and that is democratically accountable to the citizens of the UK. This principle should also apply to the provision of pre-16 education and as a result we are against universities sponsoring Academy schools.

UCU is not opposed to change. But we don't believe that changes that are in the interests of staff, students or society can be made through market mechanisms or imperatives. In this context we are very concerned about the shift towards employer 'demand-led' higher education. We believe that the increasing orientation of higher education on a narrow focus of business, enterprise and employability undermines the academic freedom which is necessary for the role of universities in fostering critical and independent thought. An employer-led approach to higher education is also likely to threaten teaching and research in disciplines and subject areas that do not fit in with a narrow business and enterprise agenda. In addition, the Government's agenda risks creating a two tier system of 'vocational' and 'discipline-oriented' degrees. This could well reinforce and aggravate existing inequalities, channelling 'non-traditional' students toward 'skills' courses and away

³House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee (2008) *Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs)*, Third Report of Session 2007-08, Volume 1, p.10.

from wider educational opportunities. Finally, we have concerns about the impact of employer-led courses, particularly ones that are delivered in private sector workplaces, on the requirement of universities and colleges to promote positive equality duties.

The central plank of the Government's new policy is to expand the number of employer co-funded places in higher education ('supporting new ways of working', 7.11-7.14). We believe it is too early in the current pilot phase for DIUS to claim that 'there is a case for more funding to be employer demand-led in the next spending review period'. Unfortunately, UK employers do not have a good track record of investing in training and education and we remain extremely sceptical about their willingness to subsidise employees' participation in higher education. We note that in the current pilots HEFCE have typically funded additional student numbers at 70-80 per cent rather than securing matched funding from employers.

By making swathes of HE courses dependent on the ability to secure private sector contracts and funding, the Government will only increase instability, making more and more core funding dependent on the short-term training needs of employers. HEFCE have admitted that co-funding is a high risk strategy:

"We are trying to do two things at once: build a platform of capacity within higher education to support a potential programme of accelerated growth in employer cofunded provision from 2010-11 onwards, at the same time as test marketing whether a market exists, the nature and scale of the potential demand, and the most effective provider approaches to growing and supplying that market."

Scepticism about the new programme is even shared by the CBI, with its Director General calling the co-funded programme "something of a leap in the dark".⁴ As the vice chancellor of Surrey University has recently put it:

*"The UK investment in HE expressed in terms of its GDP remains less than half the average of OECD countries, and most notably the US. It will take more than co-funding from employers to help address this gap if we are to maintain the standards, reputation and competitiveness of UK higher education."*⁵

We urge the Government to rethink its approach on additional co-funded places.

Sector Skills Councils

The consultation paper sets out a much increased role for Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) especially a new co-purchasing role for SSCs in the expansion in co-funded places

⁴Richard Lambert (2007), Inaugural Universities UK lecture, 11 December
<http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/lambertspeech111207.pdf>

⁵Christopher Snowden (2008)'We cannot rely on industry to develop our graduates', *Guardian*, 24 June, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/comment/story/0,,2287097,00.html>

(paragraphs 7.15 – 7.16). We have concerns that SSCs do not yet have the capacity to respond to this new challenge. There is also the question of how representative SSCs are of all the employers in their sector, especially small and medium enterprises. Given these constraints we would question the Government's claim that it expects 'the market to grow substantially after 2011'.

Through our experience of further education the UCU has major reservations about the potential for Train to Gain style system in higher education (paragraph 7.4). In particular, we would question whether an expensive brokerage system is the best mechanism for increasing employer involvement in higher education. The experience of Train to Gain provision at level 2 has also revealed a significant amount of "deadweight" programmes – i.e. simply replacing existing programmes that employers were funding anyway. We believe that there needs a much more systematic evaluation of Train to Gain programmes at levels 2 and 3 before the model is expanded into higher education.

Culture gap? (paragraphs 7.19-7.20)

The consultation paper appears to suggest that higher education institutions are reluctant to get involved with the whole employability, enterprise and knowledge transfer agenda. On the contrary, since the early 1990s there has been a marked increase in the level and scope of interaction between higher education and business in the UK. These activities have come to be seen as third strand in the missions of higher education institutions, in addition to teaching and research, and have become a significant element in the activities of universities and their staff. Employers engage with higher education institutions in a variety of ways – research and knowledge transfer, student and graduate recruitment, involvement on governance bodies and so on.

At the same time, higher education-business interactions are rightly in a minor league – compared with mainstream teaching and research – in terms of university priorities, and in terms of the amount of staff time spent on them, and in terms of the proportion of university income and expenditure they account for.

We consider it is of great importance that higher education institutions are allowed flexibility and autonomy in how they interact with business and the community; that social engagement is considered as valid as economic engagement; and that institutions guard against the commercialisation of knowledge restricting academic freedom.⁶ There is also a need for increased awareness among employers of the unique role of universities in UK society, particularly the centrality of academic freedom.

⁶This is not simply an issue relating to private sector funded research. For example, we are concerned about recent changes to Research Council grant review processes in which academics are expected to justify their research in terms of its potential short term economic impact.

The UCU, therefore, is concerned about attempts to re-engineer whole institutions, including the academic workforce, along 'business facing' lines. At the University of Hertfordshire, for example, the management (with HEFCE funding) are seeking to ensure that "every course at the university is developed with input from employers, while research is designed and conducted with the aim of solving business problems and generating new and innovative applications for existing knowledge." The process fails to understand the motivations of academic and related staff whereby self-determined research and scholarship and student educational development are the major sources of job satisfaction (as identified in the 2005 DfES-funded survey of academic staff).⁷ While UCU members are happy to collaborate with employers in their role as researchers, lecturers, computing staff, librarians and administrators, they did not enter academia to generate profits for private companies. We are concerned that the 'business facing' agenda seeks to turn universities (and therefore their staff) into the teaching and research arm of employers.

Encouraging employees (paragraphs 7.7-7.10)

We are a strong supporter of the TUC's unionlearn initiative, including its attempts to improve links between trade unions and the higher education sector. We strongly welcome the memorandum of understanding that has been developed between unionlearn and the Open University (OU). The memorandum involves a special arrangement between the two organisations which means that union learners can claim a 10 percent discount on fees for OU first year undergraduate courses that carry 30 and 60 points towards their qualification.

Improved information, advice and guidance are key elements in any strategy to increase and widen participation in higher education. As a result UCU welcomes the establishment of the new adult advancement and careers service (paragraph 7.7). UCU believes that as well as the need to target and prioritise the unskilled, low-skilled and workless, the new adult careers service should seek to provide wider access to a whole range of other adult learners. Also, whilst recognising that such a service's initial and main priorities will be around adult skills, employability and employment, it would be negligent not to investigate ways that such a service could be expanded to cover informal adult learning as part of its full remit.

UCU opposes the expansion of two-year honours degree programmes. In particular, we have major concerns about the quality of compressed bachelors' degrees, as well as reservations about the impact on terms and conditions of employment. We would also point out that there has been no independent evaluation of the current HEFCE flexible learning pilots. Previous attempts at compressed degree programmes (for example, the projects in the mid-1990s to extend the academic year) were largely unsuccessful. Bearing

⁷ Metcalf et al (2005) The recruitment and retention of academic staff in higher education, National Institute of Economic and Social Research, research report RR658:

this in mind, it seems premature for DIUS to announce further targets for the growth of two-year programmes (paragraph 7.8).

On a more positive note, the union supports plans to develop a nation-wide credit system. Making it easier for students to be awarded credits after they have successfully completed a 'block' of learning should help to improve access to higher education. At the same time, we remain unsure as to how much these micro-changes will be sufficient to generate significant new demand for higher education. More radical changes are needed, such as major improvements in student finance arrangements, particularly for part-timers. We also need to explore statutory obligations on employers to provide paid time off work for their employees to study.

Raising employability skills (5.8)

With the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees and the expansion of foundation degrees there is clearly greater instrumentalism amongst students and more emphasis on a degree as an investment in a career. Universities have responded to the new climate by introducing employability as a key part of the higher education curriculum (for example, the student employability profiles developed by the HEA subject centres).

Our members understand the importance of producing 'employable' graduates, particularly the key role of higher education in developing a student's communicative and cognitive skills (ironically, if the focus shifts to training students for particular jobs or business sectors then precisely those communicative and cognitive skills which employers currently value – i.e. that make their employees independent, critical and analytical, and thus flexible and adaptable to different tasks - are likely to diminish).

At the same time, we remain wary about aspects of the Government's employability agenda. In particular, by placing the responsibility for full employment on individuals not on society, the employability agenda underestimates the role played by structural factors such as race, class, gender in determining labour market opportunities and outcomes.

UCU welcomes the proposal to promote the value of studying languages and undertaking periods of study and work (5.11). Through our global union federation, Education International, UCU has been an active participant in the Bologna process and we have focussed heavily on the need for greater staff and student mobility across the European Higher Education Area. The Lets Go initiative, run jointly by Education International and the European Students' Union, seeks to develop the campaign further.⁸

Language is one of the barriers to UK students deciding to study overseas. Other constraints include the problem of growing student debt and the impact of term-time

⁸See the website at <http://www.lets gocampaign.net/>

working and caring responsibilities on opportunities to study in a foreign country. The Government needs to address these barriers before it can seriously expect to expand the number of UK students studying abroad.

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)

UCU welcomes the continued emphasis on increasing the number of STEM graduates, including the key work that needs to be done at the pre-university level. However, despite recent funding council initiatives, physical science provision in UK higher education continues to decline. For example, in the decade to 2007 there has been a 10 per cent reduction in the number of core, i.e. single honours science and maths degree courses offered by UK higher education institutions. Worst hit have been chemistry and physics: in the North East of England and Northern Ireland, there is only one institution providing single honours physics.⁹ There is a risk that some regions of the UK may soon lose the ability to provide single honours courses in chemistry and physics. Students – or potential students – from a minority ethnic group and from the lowest social classes are more likely to be affected by closure of a local university department since they are more likely to live at home while a student.

Other policy drivers, such as the RAE, have increased the pressures on universities to streamline their STEM provision, for example, the closure of Chemistry at Exeter and Physics at Reading. It is vital that DIUS develops a joined up approach to science provision in English higher education.

⁹University and College Union (2006) *Degrees of decline? Core science and mathematics degree courses in the UK 1998-2007*