

Higher Ambitions – the government's framework for higher education

Introduction

In his Wellcome Collection speech at the end of February 2008, former DIUS Secretary of State John Denham announced his intention to develop a framework for higher education over the next ten to fifteen years. A series of reports were commissioned on topics such as research careers, intellectual property and part-time studies.ⁱ On the 3 November 2009, the Government's vision for higher education (*Higher Ambitions - the future of universities in a knowledge economy*) was finally published.ⁱⁱ

The document is a potential watershed in that it effectively signals the end of publicly funded expansion in higher education, and suggests that a greater share of the financial burden be taken up by employers and individuals. It also opines that the introduction of variable fees has not had a negative impact on access. Other key messages include a proposal for greater flexibility over pay arrangements, an emphasis of business-facing universities in which students are to be treated as consumers, and a greater research concentration in institutions with particular strengths.

This UCU briefing paper outlines the key messages, recommendations and new policies in the framework.

1. Principal messages in the paper (emphasis added)

'**Fairer access** for educationally disadvantaged but able UK pupils has to remain a key part of how our world class universities see their missions.' 'This requires a major change in the culture of our higher education system where the focus of expansion has hitherto been in three year full time degree courses.'

'In future the burden of financing higher education's diversity of excellence will need to be more equitably shared between employers, the taxpayer, and individuals.'

'...the government's decision to introduce variable fees, which has generated an additional £1.3bn of income into the sector, **without any apparent negative impact on access.**'

'**More research concentration** where institutions are strongest.'

'...**compete for funds** to provide courses in subjects relevant to Britain’s economic future, working in partnership with business. Institutions unable to meet such strategic needs can expect to see their funding reduced to provide resources for those who can.'

'Business and employers need to contribute more.'

'Universities already need to be rigorous in **withdrawing from activities of lower priority and value**, so that they can invest more in higher priority programmes. That will need to intensify.' 'Universities may need to withdraw from activities in which they cannot achieve excellence in order to focus on the areas where they can.'

'In future new priorities will be chiefly supported by **redistribution of existing funds** and leverage of private investment rather than provision of new money.'

'...but the **constraints on public finances** will make it impossible to sustain the growth in public spending on universities seen over the last decade.'

'Universities have enjoyed a benign financial climate over recent years. **Growth based so heavily on state funding cannot continue** and this confronts government and the universities with a series of challenges. Maintaining excellence in both teaching and research is key...maintaining that level through public expenditure alone will be extremely difficult.'

'The universities that succeed best are likely to be those with strong leadership that has the confidence to challenge vested interests. **Universities will need to control costs, including pay**. They will need to be more flexible in their pay arrangements, to respond to local conditions, promote career paths that span business and academia, and compete for top talent in the international arena.'

'We want to see **distinctions between part-time and full-time labels becoming increasingly irrelevant**.'

2. Summary of recommendations on each of the six themes in the paper

Access

- Talent spotting poor children early on in their schooling (plans to be announced in early 2010).
- Universities encouraged to use contextual data in admissions (i.e. to take social and economic disadvantage into account when applying entrance standards).
- Martin Harris to advise on further action to widen access by spring 2010 (see below).
- Expansion of foundation degrees, better progression from apprenticeships to HE, implementation of New University Challenge (local access to university study).

The 50% (18-30) target is retained: 'we will continue to work towards this over the period covered by Higher Ambitions'. It is unclear what that period is.

Main strategy for widening participation is to expand number of adults at university and promote a broader range of courses alongside the three-year degree, but very little detail on how this is to be achieved.

Economic recovery

- HEFCE to devise new funding strategies to encourage competition, contestability, focus on STEM subjects, higher skills; funds diverted away from institutions whose courses fail to meet high standards of 'quality or outcome'.
- New role for UKCES to advise on graduate shortage areas and on cases where universities failing to reflect changed business requirements or the priorities articulated by employer-led bodies (SSCs, RDAs). Universities to publish statement on how they promote student employability.
- Business to be more active partners with universities, not passive customers.
- Review of postgraduate provision.

Research

- Greater focus on world-class research; more concentration.
- REF and impact assessment of research to influence funding choices.
- Stronger long-term relationships between business and universities; greater use by universities of shared services to exploit IPR.

Teaching

- Universities to publish standard set of information setting out what students can expect from programmes, including direct contact time with staff, and data on graduate destinations and salaries.
- Strengthen role of external examiners.

Local communities/international

- Contribute to regional economic development through RDAs.
- Champion the international standing of universities (NB: David Lammy currently leading a task force).
- Empower universities to be world leaders in e-learning. The so-called 'Brindley task force' to report autumn 2010. Seedcorn funding for university-private sector partnerships.

Maintain excellence under tighter public financial constraints

Fees review to report in summer 2010.

3. New policy announcements

The paper is very light on new policies. However, that does not mean that it is unimportant. **On the contrary, it can be viewed as an historical landmark in the development of post-war higher education on a par with Robbins or Dearing, because it effectively announces the end of the era of publicly-financed expansion that has continued (with a few blips like the 1981 cuts) under different governments over the last 40 years.** The government provided some limited additional funding for extra student places this year (and approximately 30,000 applicants were still excluded), but that may be the last time that happens for many years, if ever. The broad thrust of the paper - reduction of public in favour of private funding, focus on the economic contribution of universities ('value for money') and on the student as customer - are equally themes of Conservative Party policy.

In so far as there are new policies (or consultations) in the paper, these are:

Martin Harris’s access review (to report by Spring 2010)

The fundamental contradiction running throughout the BIS paper is between, on the one hand, a strong commitment to widening access to higher education, and, on the other, a clear intention to cut public funding and to increase tuition fees. We must continue to highlight these tensions in government policy.

Within the HE sector the research intensive universities have been the most enthusiastic advocates of increased fees. It is no surprise then that the Government have announced a specific review of access to 'selective' universities (to be undertaken by the chief executive of the Office for Fair Access, Martin Harris). The Harris review provides UCU with an opportunity to try to widen the debate about access beyond the 'blame the universities' mantra and to direct attention to the bigger picture. The main determinants of access are the capacity of the schools and colleges to produce qualified applicants and the number of funded places available to them in higher education institutions. How many working class students were among the 30,000 for whom there were no places this year? What is the real demand for student places?

Expansion of new types of HE programmes; more flexible study patterns

Ironically, this includes a commitment to the further expansion of foundation degrees at the moment when HEFCE is proposing to remove the funding premium from these courses which was originally introduced precisely to encourage their growth.

There are other proposals here in the general area of 'joining up' educational provision in different sectors which we should be able to support (access from apprenticeships to HE; stronger FE/HE partnerships, and so on). Further details were announced in the recent Skills Strategy document, including the proposal for an Apprenticeship Scholarships Fund, to provide a 'golden hello' of up to £1000 to 1,000 of the best apprenticeships seeking to go into HE.

HEFCE to be asked to devise new funding incentives to promote higher level skills

This is about the redistribution of existing resources within the system in favour of STEM subjects and whichever areas of study are deemed to be to the country’s ‘competitive advantage’. Mixed in with this is the reference to diverting resources away from institutions whose courses fail to meet high standards of quality or outcome.

It is extremely difficult to pin down what all this might mean in practice. It is likely to take the form of competitive bidding (‘contestability’) for streams of priority funding linked to the government’s declared economic priorities. This is not entirely new, but if it covers a significant proportion of available funding, as it might, it could have a huge impact on the sector, leading to widespread departmental closures and even threats to the viability of some institutions. We have seen how much impact a relatively small redistribution of resources can have – e.g. the impact of the 2001 RAE on 4-rated departments or the current effect of the ELQ policy. Some of the institutions with the best record on access and part-time education might be the most at risk.

However, it is difficult to say more about this until we see the promised HEFCE consultation. We are currently exploring with HEFCE the timescale for the new policy, in particular whether changes are likely to be introduced before the general election.

We also need to challenge the underlying assumptions behind the government’s wish to impose a form of workforce planning on universities – a foolish enterprise if ever there was one. It doesn’t even work in medicine, where there is at least some case for trying. It also sits rather uneasily with the emphasis on student choice. If students are customers, paying for their own higher education, why should their choice of course be restricted because ‘employers’ say they want more of this and less of that.

UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) to identify where universities are not meeting demands for key skills; universities to say how they enhance employability

In recent years there has been an increasing requirement for university courses to highlight their contribution towards ‘employability’. More contentiously, the Government have attempted to encourage notions of ‘entrepreneurship’ into the HE curriculum. The proposed UKCES role is also worrying, because it looks like more of the *folie de grandeur* otherwise known as workforce planning. We need to challenge the notion that universities do not produce the graduates that the country needs. Where is the evidence for that?

Universities to publish standard set of information setting out what students can expect from their course

Universities do a lot of this already but the ‘standard’ approach would be new. The dangers of this are obvious: information about things like student/staff contact time and graduate

salary levels can be extremely misleading unless heavily contextualised and can form the basis for adding another set of columns to the league tables. There are also dangers, in the more competitive environment that the government wants to create, of manipulation of information by institutions in order to attract students.

The paper says that HEFCE, QAA and UKCES are going to be asked to work on this. NUS are also likely to be supportive of this initiative. UCU’s intervention will be aimed at promoting a more sophisticated and safety-first approach to this project than we are likely to get from bodies such as the UKCES.

Empower universities to be world leaders in the international market for e-learning

UCU have done a lot of work in this area, national and international. We need to ensure that we have an input to the ‘Brindley’ task force which is looking at how the UK can increase its share of the e-learning market.

The paper also announces seedcorn funding (by competition through HEFCE) to support university-private sector partnerships in this area. Compared to Conservative Party policy it is a relatively modest proposal to incentivise private sector involvement in higher education. However, the previous attempt by HEFCE to create a UK ‘e-university’ was a financial disaster and we should be alert to the potential dangers of going down this route again.

Conclusion

UCU will be responding to the various aspects of the Higher Ambitions paper (for example, the postgraduate review). At the same time, it is important that we don’t lose sight of the broader ideological challenges. The latest government vision for higher education represents an intensification of the trend towards an employer and student customer-led system. The forthcoming publication of the UCU education manifesto provides an excellent opportunity to challenge this impoverished vision for higher education.

End notes

ⁱ The papers from the so-called ‘Higher Education Debate’ are available from <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education-debate>

ⁱⁱ The full report and executive summary of Higher Ambitions is downloadable from <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-ambitions>