

# **Defending the foundations of excellence: University title, academic standards and the reputation of UK higher education**

## **Policy framework**

There has been a general policy trend toward relaxing the higher education regulatory framework governing who can award degrees. For example, the 2004 Higher Education Act enabled institutions to awarding degrees without the necessity of offering research degrees, leading to a number of former colleges of higher education obtaining degree-awarding powers.

Private companies are now lobbying for further deregulation of the higher education regulatory framework in order to gain easier access to university title, enabling them to tap into the brand recognition attached to UK higher education.

For example, Dean of BPP College, Chris Brady argued that the company would like to see “the process by which private providers such as BPP can move from approved Degree Awarding Powers (DAP) institutions to formal University status ...simplified. Unless this happens the changes necessary for the sector will be considerably hampered.”

## **University title**

The current criteria for university title are already extremely loose. According to the QAA, university title can be obtained by any provider which can show that:

- It has taught degree awarding powers
- It normally has at least 4000 full-time equivalent higher education students of whom at least 3000 are registered on degree level courses
- It can demonstrate that it has regard to the principles of good governance as are relevant to the sector.

*(Applications for the grant of taught degree-awarding powers, research degree-awarding powers and university title: Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales (2004))*

The QAA is frustratingly silent on the principles of good governance or in what institutions this might be embodied.

## **University title and quality control**

UCU has major concerns about the effects of further de-regulation in relation to university title.

In a recent contribution to the debate on the future of universities, Colin Lucas and Geoffrey Boulton emphasized that the historic success of European and north American universities has been built on core elements that have been in place for over 200 years: their 'highly interactive social setting and operational freedom'.

This has implications for the internal 'composition' and constitution of universities. As Boulton and Lucas argue: "The freedom to enquire, to debate, to criticise and to speak truth to power, whether it be the power of government, of those that fund the university, or those who manage it, is central to the vitality of the university and its utility to society. It is crucial that rectors and university governing boards understand this essential source of institutional strength, that they are steadfast in its support, strong in its defence and are not seduced by the fallacy of managerial primacy: that things that make management difficult necessarily need to be removed or reformed. An easily governed university is no university at all.

## **Private providers and quality control**

UCU has serious concerns about the current establishment of private providers. As we showed in our recent report 'Privatising our universities', there are major and obvious failings in these institutions as compared both with current best practice in the publicly controlled sector, most notably in relation to their governance structures and to academic control.

In the case of BPP College, for example:

- Unlike a university, there is no statement of academic freedom and no accountability structure for defending academic freedom
- The BPP employment contract does not contain time or resources for scholarship, merely an expectation that staff will remain current in their fields.
- BPP lecturers have no pay progression and inferior terms and conditions.
- There is little real academic control of curriculum. Unlike a university, which has an academic board independent of its governing body, BPP only has an 'academic council' which contains a minority of academics and only two members of academic staff.
- There is no public accountability through Freedom of Information legislation.

## Effects on quality in UK higher education

UCU believes that it is dangerous to extend University title to institutions with such obvious defects. We believe that this undermines one of the foundations on which the international reputation of UK universities is built.

Extending university title to institutions like BPP College would permit into the university system institutions with wholly inadequate controls on quality and standards to the general detriment of the entire system. This could have a damaging effect on the reputation of UK higher education at a time when it is a major international export.

- While competition may be able to bring some efficiencies, if it takes place in an under-regulated space, it could effect a dangerous 'levelling down' influence on the quality of provision at 'public' institutions. This is particularly the case at a time when institutions are under pressure to reduce costs as there will be additional pressure to cut staff costs by introducing the kind of staffing structures used by BPP College, for example.
- In addition, an unregulated growth of the private sector would have significant effects on the range of and diversity of provision available through UK higher education. Private providers in general are 'free-riders' on the teaching and research done in the publicly funded sector. They have a tendency to 'cherry pick' profitable provision in the name of efficiency. Whereas public universities can cross-subsidise their non-profitable provision with profitable provision, preserving an overall wide range of courses, the private providers will concentrate on those courses that will deliver short-term shareholder value.
- If competition from private providers concentrating on high-profit and low-overhead courses drives public universities out of businesses, as advocated by commentators such as Policy Exchange, this will have an impact on wider provision, narrowing the range of provision available overall through UK higher education.

## Professional control of standards

UCU believes that it is important to protect the brand identity of UK higher education. Accordingly, University title should be reserved to institutions that are either under *greater* regulatory control *or* which fulfil the following criteria, developed from within the profession itself. University title shall be awarded to those institutions which:

- Make a public statement of academic freedom in line with the UNESCO recommendations.
- Allow time for scholarly research in their employment contracts

- Provide stability of employment and genuine career pathways for academic staff
- Provide properly stocked and maintained resources for scholarship, such as genuine academic libraries.
- Offer a broad portfolio of subjects and disciplines.
- Are publicly accountable, at the very least through Freedom of Information legislation
- Have a genuinely independent academic council, made up solely or predominantly of academics, which is responsible for programme oversight, curriculum development and the defence of academic freedom.
- Are subject to regular and rigorous quality audits.

UCU believes that unless private providers and other institutions of higher education can demonstrate that their internal governance and employment structures support the basic functions and the core, foundational strengths of the university system that has been built over the last 200 years, there should be no question of an easy transition to 'university title', nor should there be any attempt to institute a 'level playing field' with regard to the statutory time limit on degree awarding powers.