
Students at the heart of the system

Higher Education White Paper: UCU response

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in further and higher education throughout the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the overall strategy in the Higher Education White Paper.

The White Paper represents a radical change in the funding, structure and delivery of higher education in England. Unsurprisingly, our members have taken its contents very seriously given that they could dramatically alter the environment within which they work. The views expressed in this consultation response reflect those of our members.

The starting point for those views is a deeply-held belief in the value of higher education to society as well as to individuals. Our members are strongly opposed to the overall strategy in the White Paper which seeks ultimately to privatise higher education by shifting its funding from the state to individual students and their families. This represents an impoverished view of the purposes of higher education and poses a fundamental threat to its ability to meet the wider social, cultural and

economic needs of the country. In the words of one of our members:

The value of education and its qualitative benefits is a glaring oversight which this paper has failed to acknowledge, let alone attempt to emphasise and measure.

Mahmoona Shah, Bradford College

In particular, UCU members are opposed to the government's 'vision' for higher education. This 'vision' includes:

- students as 'consumers' purchasing a 'product' and seeking to maximise the 'return' on their 'investment'
- institutions competing in a market driven by variable price and 'quality'
- the state withdrawing from the funding of teaching for all subjects other than those defined as of strategic importance
- the encouragement of private, for-profit providers.

Rather than improving the student experience these reforms will undermine academic quality and standards in higher education.

Financing students

The centrepiece of the new funding regime is to replace direct HEFCE grants for teaching with graduate contributions, in the form of subsidised student loans. For a variety of reasons we believe this approach is fundamentally flawed.

First, there are serious contradictions in the official justification for these changes. On the one hand the government seeks to situate them in the context of the budget deficit and the desire for substantial savings to public expenditure (p 4). At the same time, the BIS loans outlay will rise significantly in the next few years. For example, it is estimated that total BIS investment in higher education in England could increase by nearly 10 per cent in cash terms by 2014-15 (Annual grant letter to HEFCE, 20 December 2010). We believe that the changes are primarily ideological, namely, the marketisation and privatisation of our higher education system.

Second, there is no international precedent for such a radical move away from teaching grants to a 'voucher' system (although the White Paper does not use the word 'voucher' to describe the new fees policy, in essence, the government will be providing the student with a loan that acts as a 'voucher' and then the student carries that 'voucher' to the university of their choice). Very few places have implemented a voucher system in higher education. According to the 2009 HEPI report entitled Vouchers as a mechanism for funding higher education, the results in Colorado have been far from impressive ("... the only significant voucher scheme in higher education in the world is judged by those who have evaluated it to have been unsuccessful.")

Third, the government's decision to raise public tuition fees to the highest levels in the developed world will deny opportunities to hundreds of thousands of potential students, lead to a criminal wastage of their talents and reinforce the social class inequalities

that bedevil our society and constrain our economy.

Fourth, the withdrawal of the block grant for the majority of subjects means that large parts of higher education are no longer to be perceived of as a public good but as a private investment. In the government's view, humanities, arts, and social sciences, unlike STEM subjects and research, apparently have no public value at the higher education level (although this appears to clash with a school curricula policy that emphasises the utility of traditional subjects such as History, Geography and English). This position in HE is so extreme that even the chief executive of HEFCE has said that he is not comfortable living and working in a country that does not provide teaching funding for arts and humanities courses.

What are the alternatives?

The government claims that there is no alternative to the current fee proposals. However, the different approach to fees in Scotland, and now in Wales and Northern Ireland, provides a sharp contrast to England. Increasingly, students in England are the least favourably treated within the UK. The message that is conveyed is that the value of higher education is better understood and more highly appreciated in the devolved nations.

UCU's greatest disappointment in the Browne review and the government's response was its failure to approach the future funding of higher education with a genuinely open mind. Apart from the graduate tax (which is also a system for placing additional financial burdens on students/graduates), it did not seriously consider any alternative funding methods to its favoured neo-liberal approach.

UCU has argued for some time that there is a gross imbalance of contributions from the three main beneficiaries of higher education: students; society as a whole represented by

the state; and business and industry, which profit directly from the education and training of the graduates that they recruit and rely upon. Now we are faced with an extraordinary situation in which the state is withdrawing from the higher education contract and the students are being asked to bear the whole burden, as if there were no social return on investment in higher education at all, as if it were a purely private good – an unsustainable position in both principle and practice.

We believe that the partner who has under-contributed and whose investment in higher education should be increased is business, which is why we have advocated a Business Education Tax (UCU and Compass In Place of Fees: time for a business education tax?, 2010). We have shown how a modest increase in corporation tax, which would still leave the UK's main rate below that of France, the USA and Japan, would enable us to sustain a long-term high quality public higher education system open to all.

Student number controls and greater competition

The second main plank of the White Paper is greater institutional competition for undergraduate places, albeit within a strict control of overall student numbers. Because it has failed to predict the actions of higher education institutions in replacing their lost teaching grants with average fees of £8,509, the government has sought to inject new competitive pressures into the system to create something resembling a market, and in particular to drive down the cost of fees. Measures include the creation of a new 'mini-market' in 'AAB+' students and to open up 20,000 'margin' places to providers with average full-time fees of £7,500 or less.

In conjunction with the student funding proposals, these 'contestability' proposals will inject massive instability into the system, threatening the viability of courses, departments and perhaps whole institutions. In particular:

- UCU has identified that the removal of teaching grant places many institutions at serious financial risk (UCU, Universities at risk - the impact of cuts in higher education spending on local economies, December 2010).
- The contestability proposals create a new 'squeezed middle', in which post-92 universities and the less selective pre-92 universities will face the loss of 'AAB+' students gained through clearing as well as facing price competition from new alternative providers for the 20,000 student places in the flexible 'margin'.
- There is no real evidence that the government has modelled these potential effects, although their new role for HEFCE makes it clear that they do envisage institutions 'failing'.
- There will also be massive pressure on institutions to constantly restructure, and in many institutions this will lead to endless rounds of redundancy, as well as downward pressure on terms and conditions for all staff (eg more casualisation).
- As a substantial proportion of the 'AAB+' students come from relatively affluent backgrounds, including those studying at independent or selective schools, the proposals could undermine widening access initiatives within research-led universities and, as a consequence, reinforce the social segregation between groups of institutions.
- The 'AAB+' policy may also have a disruptive impact on subject choice as some disciplines have fewer 'AAB+' students than others, notably some STEM disciplines where the entry level is often a little lower than other classroom based subjects.

Competition for such large numbers would put universities in a position in which they cannot

predict student numbers – this is an incentive toward more fixed-term lectureships and teaching-only contracts. This seems likely to lead to worse employment conditions for an increasing number of new entrants to the academic profession, and over time, a worse student experience when good lecturers look elsewhere for secure employment.
Michael Farrelly, Open University

Improving the student experience

The government claims that the new system will put students at ‘the heart of the system’ but as consumers in a marketplace rather than as participants in an educational process. This ‘vision’ is best summed up by the phrase: ‘Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money’ (p 32).

UCU has a number of criticisms of this consumerist approach to student learning. First, it assumes a conflict of interest between the ‘student customer’ and the education ‘service provider’ which erodes the trust relationship and shared responsibility between teacher and student that necessarily defines higher education. Second, it pushes students into regarding their education as a commodity that must fundamentally represent ‘value for money’, possibly leading students into a passive mode of complaining about dissatisfaction with marks for essays, examinations, projects, grades awarded and degree classifications, rather than encouraging them to contribute actively and creatively to the joint educational enterprise of learning and teaching. Making students pay for their higher education does not necessarily lead them to engage more constructively in its development and improvement. This is well summed up by one of our members:

The problem with the consumerist model is that it produces a “teach me” attitude, which assumes that students merely receive information, rather than absorb through experience with other students, with lecturers as facilita-

tors (as they should be). I fear we will have a situation of “I’ve paid my fees, work for me.”
Dave Proctor, Leeds Metropolitan University

Above all, with its relentless emphasis on consumerism, employability and ‘value for money’, the consultation document “...fails to see the university as a diverse community, made up of researchers, teachers, students, administrators and support staff who work to provide an education and not solely ‘training for employability, however important the world of work may be” (Campaign for the Public University, Putting Vision Back into Higher Education: A Response to the Government White Paper).

Public information

The White Paper places a strong emphasis on the provision of information to prospective students and their families. Of course, students should have straightforward access to good, relevant information about higher education courses and institutions. However, the dangers of a consumerist approach 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 simplistic 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 publication of student evaluation surveys (p34) represents an extension of the ‘student satisfaction’ model pioneered by the National Student Survey (NSS). Internal student feedback has been a key part of HE courses for many years but it is essentially a developmental process that encourages practitioners to reflect on their teaching styles. Insisting on the publication of student feedback will result in a tick-box, competitive edge approach rather than one based on good educational practice. UCU is keen to ensure that prospective

students have a clearer idea about GCSE and 'A' Level subject choice for particular higher education courses. However, the proposal to publish course-by-course data on the qualifications held by previously successful applicants may have unintended consequences for widening access. The initiative appears to have been prompted by concerns that school students are choosing the 'wrong' types of qualifications for certain universities (eg vocational subjects rather than the 'facilitating' qualifications contained within the English Baccalaureate). Unfortunately, the agenda appears narrowly focused on schools and universities in the Russell Group as no mention is made of the role of FE colleges or other level 3 qualifications in securing access to higher education.

UCU supports the principle of enhanced training and professional development opportunities for academic and academic-related staff and believes that initial training for new entrants to the profession, properly resourced and supported, allied to good institutional programmes of CPD, can help to ensure high standards of teaching in higher education. However, we have reservations about the proposals to publish information on teaching qualifications (p.29), and in particular the potential for widespread institutional 'games-playing'. We would be concerned about the development of a new HEA 'league table' on qualifications and the potential pressure on courses to pass staff who had not achieved the appropriate standards.

Overall, we believe that the greatest threat to the quality of teaching and learning will be lack of public investment rather than inadequate public information. In our view, what Professor Roger Brown has described as "conscientious professional practice in an adequately funded system" remains the best way to ensure the quality of higher education ('Protecting the public interest in higher education', 'Universities in the 21st Century' conference, 24 November 2010).

Increasing social mobility

Chapter five is devoted to the issues of social mobility and widening access. There are some positive proposals in this section of the White Paper, such as increased resources for the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the extension of tuition fee loans to some part-time students. However, these proposals are mere window dressing compared to the range of regressive policies being enacted by the current government. Such policies include:

- the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the Aim Higher programme
- the imposition of tuition fees on access courses in further education colleges (from which 40% of university students come)
- the introduction of a National Scholarship Programme which by its third year of operation will still be less than half the amount that institutions will spend on student bursaries in 2010-11 (£337 million)
- the creation of a new mini-market in 'AAB+' students, which will undermine widening access initiatives in research-led universities
- the grossly irresponsible failure to assess the impact of the undergraduate fee increases on recruitment to postgraduate education and research.

Above all, the new competitive market place will lead to students making decisions on where to study based on cost, with those from poorer backgrounds choosing to go to cheaper lower-tier institutions and looking for 'value for money', while those from wealthier backgrounds will not have to worry about such considerations and will still get the 'traditional' student experience. Our members are deeply worried about the implications for access to higher education:

Widening participation is the biggest problem of all in my eyes. I come from a mining village

in the North West and there is absolutely no way I would have been able to study with any fees, never mind £9k a year. The argument that these are paid later is no argument – it will put kids from working class background off from studying at HE level. It's educational apartheid.

Dave Proctor, Leeds Metropolitan University

I am unconvinced that students from poorer backgrounds will be sufficiently provided for financially to enable them to risk participating in HE. These young people are very debt-averse and find universities daunting places, especially those universities that are highly middle class and are likely to become particularly expensive once the £9K cap is lifted (which will probably be within a few years).

Vikki Boliver, Bath Spa University

A new fit-for-purpose regulatory framework

The notion of what is meant by a university education is under threat here. Degree level education was, by its nature something taught by academics who are leading their subject area, who do research and whose activities extend beyond the classroom in ways which enrich the educational experience. If any institution can provide degrees, this seems to be a step along the path to the conclusion that anyone can teach degrees – and then who needs academics!

Professor, University of the West of England

The most radical section of the White Paper is the chapter on the new regulatory framework. Here the government is proposing a constitutional revolution in the structure of higher education: a redefinition of what it means to be a university, who can offer degrees and who regulates the sector as a whole. UCU will be responding to the technical consultation document on the regulatory framework but we would also like to make some general comments on these proposals.

The primary purpose of the new regulatory framework will be to create opportunities for private, for-profit providers to enter the higher education sector. In fact, the privateers – not students – are the big winners in the White Paper.

This policy gamble is contrary to the advice offered to ministers. Earlier in the year, a report from HEFCE warned that the government's policy of encouraging 'for-profit' private providers could damage the UK's higher education global reputation. It said that for-profits and private providers may offer qualifications which may not be widely recognised, cherry-pick profitable courses and put public universities in financial danger. In the USA, scandals around the selling of courses to students have prompted an investigation by the US Senate into companies such as Apollo and have seen for-profits described as 'sub-prime education'.

The expansion of the private, for-profit higher education sector is of major concern to our members. The negative impact on the quality of higher education is one of the key issues raised in our consultation over the White Paper:

As a UCU member originally from the USA, the entry of private providers into the higher education sector is something I find very worrying. In the US we have seen distressing numbers of students exploited by unscrupulous private providers, who offer near-useless degree courses to vulnerable students seeking further education in order to turn a profit... The promise of such institutions is that they can provide university degrees more flexibly, and without the commitment and expense normally associated with publicly-funded institutions. In practice, they cut corners to save costs, provide sub-par education, and deceive students. Further, employers know that these degrees are next to worthless – and so the student receives little real-world benefit from their investment in them.

Eric Silverman, University of Southampton

The UK attracts a great deal of international funding due to the (deserved reputation) of its higher education sector that has maintained a focus on academic excellence backed by research and scholarly activity. Removing barriers to entry jeopardises this by hijacking the kudos of academically excellent institutions by ones that are simply....cheaper.

Reader, University of Gloucestershire

Private providers will quickly gain a reputation as providing cheap, production-line style degrees, as they do in the USA. This will devalue the degree.

Senior Lecturer, University of Huddersfield

Because of genuine concerns about academic quality, UCU will continue to campaign against the expansion of private, for-profit providers into English higher education. Over the White Paper we will be lobbying hard for new and existing for-profit institutions to be subject to a more rigorous quality assurance regime.

On the expansion of higher education within further education colleges UCU will continue to demand that HE in FE staff have comprehensive access to remitted time away from teaching to engage in necessary scholarly activity and research that will deepen and update both their subject knowledge and pedagogy to consistently underwrite a high quality learning experience for all HE in FE students.

Research and innovation

Finally, we are disappointed that there is no role for postgraduate education or research in the strategy. The essence of higher education is the inter-relationship between teaching, scholarship and research and yet the White Paper treats them as distinct functions. It reflects a broader deficiency in the consultation document, ie the complete failure to acknowledge the contribution of staff to the achievements of our higher education system or to propose measures which will reward their efforts and motivate them to continue their commitment in the future.