

Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice - BIS consultation

Summary of UCU response to Green paper

18 January 2016

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INTRODUCTION AND KEY MESSAGES

The voice of academic and academic-related, professional staff is missing from the entire green paper, including the proposals for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which offers very little for staff who do the teaching and support learning in higher education.

Everyone recognises the need to support and value high-quality teaching and learning, but unless government and institutions place staff at the centre of the process and address underlying issues such as casualisation, workloads, lack of career progression and funding, the green paper is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives.

In recent years the unrestricted growth in private, for-profit providers, coupled with a regulatory framework ill-equipped to deal with them has left students and UK taxpayers at unacceptable risk. The reputation of UK higher education will be further damaged by plans in the green paper to make it easier for private, for-profit providers to enter the higher education system.

The proposals in the green paper (on the TEF, market entry and the higher education architecture) will result in further fragmentation between teaching, scholarship and research.

TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

We support the objective ‘to build a culture where it is recognised that teaching should have equal status with research within and across higher education institutions and that good teachers should enjoy the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as good researchers’ (BIS, 2015, p.18).

However, this objective is unlikely to be met as a result of the TEF proposals. In particular, we are opposed to linking TEF scores to tuition fees, the privileging of flawed proxy metrics as indicators of ‘quality’ and the increased bureaucracy and institutional game playing that will result in implementing the TEF (see pages 7-8, 10, 14 of the UCU response).

A system for evaluating the quality of teaching must address staffing-related matters such as working conditions and professional development. In particular, we call on BIS

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to investigate the link between casualisation and the student learning experience and to focus on outcomes (rather than policies) in relation to promotion procedures (see pages 12-15 of the UCU response).

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT SUPPORT

UCU has welcomed the target to double the participation rate of young people from disadvantaged and black and minority ethnic backgrounds, but considers the proposed measures are unlikely to achieve it (see pages 15-16 of the UCU response).

Moreover, widening participation initiatives are undermined by the government's regressive changes to student funding, particularly the decision to abolish means-tested maintenance grants (see page 4 of the UCU response).

We are concerned that the green paper does little to address the problems facing mature and part-time students (see pages 5, 17 of the UCU response).

From a democratic point of view, we consider it wholly inappropriate that the power to set tuition fee caps will rest with the Secretary of State rather than with the Westminster Parliament (page 24 of the UCU response).

PRIVATE PROVIDERS

In the interests of ensuring academic quality and protecting the public purse, we are opposed to plans to speed up the entry of private, for-profit providers into the higher education system. This includes plans to make it easier for such providers to obtain Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) and University Title.

Our preference is for an enhanced audit regime for private, for-profit providers to mitigate against the extra risk posed by for-profit corporate forms (see pages 18-19 of the UCU response). This includes additional financial obligations on such providers as a means to protect students from 'provider exit' (pages 20-21 of the UCU response).

In the absence of increased controls on for-profit providers, we continue to support the existing DAP/University title criteria around track record, student numbers and finance and governance arrangements (see page 18 of the UCU response).

We call for 'levelling up' in relation to Freedom of Information (FOI) requirements on private providers rather than 'levelling down' (see page 25 of the UCU response).

HIGHER EDUCATION ARCHITECTURE

We share concerns that the proposed Office for Students (OfS) may end up being a government-led body, rather than one reflecting the real interests of students. In particular we note the absence of information on its governance structure and its weak protections for academic freedom (see pages 23-24 of the UCU response)

We, therefore, call for proper student and staff representation on the OfS (see page 24 of the UCU response).

On research funding, our preference is for a more fundamental review of current policy than the proposals outlined in the Nurse review for a new body called Research UK (pages 25-26 of the UCU response).

In the absence of a wider review, we call for additional protections for the block grant element of research funding and for research-teaching links to be an essential criteria in the TEF and Stern reviews (page 26 of the UCU response).