

Challenges for the next parliament:

**HOW WOULD YOU MAKE
OUR UNIVERSITIES AND
COLLEGES EVEN BETTER?**

ELECTION

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CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT PARLIAMENT:

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‘ *How would you make our universities and colleges even better?*

There is more to education than schools and nurseries – colleges and universities educate a growing proportion of both young people and adults returning to education. They improve the skills base and productivity of our economy and enhance the core values in our society. Our universities conduct leading edge research that underpins our local, regional and national economies and, along with colleges, transmit knowledge and understanding from one generation to the next.

Unfortunately, the staff who teach in both the further education (FE) and higher education (HE) sectors have been undervalued for far too long. They want to teach their students and undertake their research to the highest standards possible but their ability to do so is being increasingly hampered. Finding a solution to the continuing funding problems in HE and FE has to be a priority.

Members of Parliament will have some tough decisions to make and some hard challenges to face up to over the next few years. This document sets out the six key challenges in FE and HE and how we believe they can best be met. We'd like to know what you think.

Our members have increasingly taught their students and conducted their research against a background of low pay, insecure contracts and high levels of stress. They have continually striven to deliver excellence at every stage. They have a passion for what they do and a commitment to the long term success of their sector. We hope you will share that commitment with them.

AUT and NATFHE are working together as a single voice for the further and higher education sectors. Between us we represent nearly 120,000 members in universities and colleges across the UK. Our members include lecturers in the FE and HE sectors and both researchers and academic-related staff in universities.

... how would you make our universities and colleges even better?

1 *How do we ensure high quality further and higher education is accessible to all those who are willing and able to benefit from it?*

Let us set our sights high and ensure that all young people aged 16 upwards are in either education or training. Some will want to follow apprenticeships or other on-the-job training, others courses at FE level while many will want to go on to university. Some will want to study part-time, others full-time and some via distance learning. There is no one 'best' option for young people who all have different abilities and ambitions – it is our job to provide the education and training they each need.

Above all, no-one should feel compelled to follow a particular course because of their social background. Not least, we need to encourage more young people from non-traditional backgrounds to see that higher education can be for them. To do otherwise is unfair, uneconomic and a waste of talent.

We also need to raise the status of vocational education so that it is no longer seen as low status learning. In order to encourage access for all students we must therefore work towards parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications, something that Tomlinson's work on 14–19 tried to achieve.

The lifelong learning agenda is an economic and cultural imperative. Some adults need basic skills training – something that adult education and FE colleges have a superb tradition in delivering. Others want to increase their knowledge by studying for a first or second degree. And then there are adults who wish to combine work and study. All these forms of lifelong learning should be valued and invested in.

Trade unions – including NATFHE and AUT – are playing their part in boosting skills and promoting lifelong learning. Through Union Learning work we help ensure our members receive the professional development they need to best deliver for their students.

Whatever the level of education students gain access to, they deserve the highest quality teaching and support so they can flourish and succeed to the best of their ability. That needs investment. And for HE it means ensuring teaching takes place in a research environment where lecturers are at the forefront of their subject, allowing them to enthuse their students.

Did you know?

- 19% of young people from working class backgrounds participate in HE compared with 50% from the middle classes
- In 2004, nearly 84,000 mature students entered HE
- FE colleges help boost the number of young people with 5 good GCSEs from 53% at age 16 to 76% at age 19
- 154,000 learners enrolled on a Skills for Life course in 2002–03

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- An end to political squabbling about the HE participation rate: if adequate resources are there, why should England stop at 50% of 18–30 year olds going to HE when Scotland and others have already passed that level
- A rise in staying-on rates in education at 16 from 75% to 90% by the end of the next parliament
- A right to paid educational leave for all employees
- An ongoing commitment to the trade union learning fund through support for trade union learning reps and the development of new Union Academies across the UK.
- More funding to allow HE lecturers the time and space to undertake research and scholarship
- An end to the vocational and academic divide in both FE and HE

CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT PARLIAMENT:

2 *How can we create a funding system that enables excellence in teaching and research, encourages diversity not decline and ensures no more courses are closed and staff sacked?*

Staff in FE and HE have welcomed the present government's unprecedented funding increases for both sectors. Yet, there is still a backlog in equipment, buildings and facilities maintenance. And universities and colleges continue to close courses and shut departments, often when student demand remains buoyant. This reduction in choice for potential students and loss of knowledge and talent from our education system are major causes for concern. Our members want the next government to make a clear commitment to steadily increase public investment and undo the historical under-investment in both teaching and research.

Many universities are closing down research teams of national excellence – this is a short-sighted loss of knowledge and capacity within the system and a blow to regional economies. It is usually due to a research funding policy that rewards those at the very top but sacrifices those lower down – often the very people who will become the star researchers of the future. This damaging concentration of research funding is leading to 'subject deserts' whereby students would have to travel huge distances to access high-quality research-led teaching. This disenfranchises more and more students who are forced to study from home and cuts off a future supply of researchers and academic staff.

At the same time, the FE sector has also been plagued by closures. An unexpected consequence of the drive towards improving adult skills has been the closure of a host of adult education courses which are not seen as central to this. The 'love of learning' which adult education so often inspires in its students is in danger of being lost.

Meanwhile, staff in FE continue to see their work being valued less than that of schools. Most young people aged 16–19 study at college not at a school sixth form. And yet, colleges receive 10% less funding than schools for this work. That means fewer resources for teaching students and lower salaries for lecturers and support staff. The funding gap also affects those students studying for an HE degree at their local FE college – compared with students at university they will have access to fewer books and library resources and less contact time with their lecturers.

Did you know?

- Nearly 3,800 jobs in HE have been lost since 2002
- 79 university science, technology, engineering and maths departments closed in the past 10 years
- FE colleges receive 10% less funding than schools for teaching exactly the same courses

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- A fundamental review of university research funding with a view to scrapping the burdensome Research Assessment Exercise
- A moratorium on course closures in both FE and HE enabling a national commission to examine the impact locally, regionally and nationally
- A long-term increase in funding per student for teaching and a continued growth in resources for teaching non-traditional students
- The closure of the 10% funding gap between schools and FE colleges

... how would you make our universities and colleges even better?

3 How will the introduction in 2006 of variable top-up fees for full-time students in England affect quality and diversity in universities and colleges?

Our members were instrumental in the campaign against top-up fees in HE in England, warning that their introduction would lead to a two-tier system of access and do little to improve the funding crisis. They still believe that is true and would argue that top-up fees should be abolished. However if top-up fees are here there are two key challenges. How will this new income be spent? How will part-time students and the institutions that educate them be able to share in this extra funding when the system is geared to full-time students?

All but 8 of the 111 higher education institutions will be charging the maximum fee of £3,000. A market in fees has been avoided for the time-being. Instead we have a market in bursaries. Some universities – often those with the biggest job to do in improving their access figures – will offer large bursaries. Others – usually those who already have a high intake of non-traditional students – are able to offer much less to their students and will have the least left over to spend on facilities and staff.

As students begin to demand value for money from their investment it is clear that universities need to spend their remaining top-up fee income wisely and in a way which clearly benefits their students. This means a good quality learning environment – lecture halls, laboratories and equipment – and access to learning resources such as libraries and IT facilities. It also means reducing class sizes and reversing the doubling of the staff–student ratio that has taken place over the last two decades. Above all it means well-qualified, motivated lecturers with the best possible working environment to provide students with an excellent education. That means investing a large amount of top-up fee income in staff.

A further impact of top-up fees will be a growing funding gap between those institutions able to charge them and those unable to because of their reliance on part-time students – most of whom are in the post-1992 sector. Part-time students are denied access to the same package of loans, grants and bursaries that full-timers get. And because tuition fees for part-time courses can not be deferred, charging higher fees would hit students upfront, deterring them from entry. Institutions which rely on part-time students – for example the Open University, Birkbeck College and the University of East London – will be faced with a choice of two evils: to increase fees, risking a huge reduction in students and funding or to freeze fees, causing an unsustainable cut in funding in relation to other institutions.

Did you know?

- Top-up fees in England are expected to raise around £1.8 billion in funding of which about £300 million will be spent on bursaries
- The size of bursaries on offer from 2006 will vary from £300 to £3,000 per year, usually on top of the new grant of up to £2,700 per year
- In 17 universities more than half the students are part-time. This adds up to 39% of all HE students
- In FE, fees generate £250 million. Pressure is being put on colleges to increase fees by an inflation-busting average of 15%

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- A commitment from universities to invest 50% of their top-up fee income in their staff
- A government promise to increase investment in both teaching and research, ensuring that all universities benefit
- The Government to honour urgently its commitment to review funding for part-time HE
- The Government to move quickly towards giving all part-time students pro-rata access to the full range of grants and bursaries and the ability to defer paying fees

CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT PARLIAMENT:

4 How do we guarantee and extend the values intrinsic to post-16 education such as academic freedom?

Higher and further education is about more than training for a career. Universities and colleges are more than just businesses operating in a market. HE and FE are about spreading knowledge, transmitting new ideas and encouraging learning for its own sake. Through both teaching and research they buttress the core values of our society such as freedom of thought, liberty and democracy. For this to flourish requires staff to know that their employers, their government and the funders of their research will not penalise them just because of what they are saying or researching.

The principle of academic freedom for individual academics allows new ideas to be researched, advocated and published, however inconvenient for the academic hierarchy or for research funders such as government, charities and commercial interests. However, the statutory protection introduced in 1988 only applies to academic staff in the 'old' universities. It is time to extend this to all staff across HE and FE.

Protecting the values of academic freedom is essential for universities and colleges in their dealings abroad. They are key players in the global education system. Both staff and students come here to work and study and many universities now operate overseas campuses. They therefore have a responsibility to act in a responsible and ethical way which places the UK in the best possible light. That means neither exploiting overseas students nor relying on them to keep our universities afloat just because they pay higher fees. It means guaranteeing academic freedom and the rights of those who work in and study at UK campuses abroad. And finally it means not stripping less developed countries of their brightest and best – ensuring we do not damage these countries' ability to develop and benefit from the aid we send them.

We want to be proud of our universities and colleges not just for what they do but for the way they do it.

Did you know?

- Academic freedom in the 'old' universities is defined in the 1988 Education Act as '*[ensuring] that academic staff have the freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions*'
- In overall terms, HE in the UK gains more academic staff from abroad than it loses. In 2001–02, the net gain was 1,750 academics

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- An extension of academic freedom to cover staff in all universities and colleges across the UK
- The development of an ethical research framework which ensures research funders can not unduly influence or cover up uncomfortable research findings
- Effective national and institutional policies to ensure the recruitment of overseas staff and students does not damage the capacity of their home countries

... how would you make our universities and colleges even better?

5 *As a career in FE and HE becomes less attractive and with graduate debt levels set to soar, where will the next generation of university and college staff come from?*

It is in all our interests to be able to attract the brightest and the best to teach and research in our universities and colleges. We all benefit if lecturers have the time to give their students the education they deserve, if researchers are able to focus on new ideas not just hitting targets and if academic-related staff have the resources to provide the high quality library services, IT systems and administrative support that is required from the academic team.

Unfortunately investment in staff has never been a priority for colleges, universities or indeed government. As a result, a career in FE or HE is characterised by low pay, short-term contracts, and high workloads and stress levels. This long-term decline is now critical as thousands of staff are due to retire in the next few years while there are no signs of any strategic planning for their replacement.

Did you know?

- FE lecturers are paid 10% less than teachers in school sixth forms for doing the same job
- Dozens of FE colleges have yet to implement the national pay deal agreed in 2003. This includes a commitment to shorten the FE pay scales so that lecturers reach the top of their pay scales as quickly as school teachers
- Most universities have yet to implement the national agreement on pay modernisation that they all signed up to in the summer of 2004
- More than one-quarter of academics are aged 50 or over and so will be retiring in the next few years
- Lecturers and teachers on average work longer hours of unpaid overtime than any other occupation
- 50% of academic and related staff report symptoms of psychological distress
- In HE, 42% of academics and 93% of researchers are on short-term contracts and there are at least 30,000 hourly-paid teachers. In FE nearly two-thirds of the teaching force are part-time
- The training to be an academic usually requires taking a three-year degree, a one year Masters and often at least three years reading for a PhD

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- A national strategy for recruiting and retaining FE and HE staff over the lifetime of the next Parliament and beyond
- An increase in salaries and a commitment from all universities and colleges to abide by the pay modernisation agreements they agreed nationally with the trade unions
- The development of a fee write-off scheme for new staff in FE and HE so that their top-up fee debts are paid off over a period of time
- An end to the casualisation culture in FE and HE through an urgent reduction in the reliance on short-term contracts for staff and on agency workers and the introduction of fractional contracts for hourly-paid staff
- Smaller class sizes: lower stress levels for those who teach and more contact time for the students will benefit all those in FE and HE
- Sustainable, secure pensions and no detriment to the deferred pay and benefits offered by staff pension schemes

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CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT PARLIAMENT

6 *How do we turn our universities and colleges into standard-bearers of equality?*

Our colleges and universities should be leading the way in equality practices. The education and values taught and role models students see around them are the very heart of education – these are fundamental reasons why staff should be equally valued irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, disability or sexuality.

Sadly, the truth is far from this. Full-time women academics in universities are paid 15% less than male colleagues – a figure that has actually widened in recent years. Likewise, average salaries for black and minority ethnic (BME) staff are lower than for white academic colleagues. Both BME and women staff continue to face barriers to promotion and career progression and are more likely to be employed on a short-term contract and on a lower grade – a situation for which nobody is prepared to take responsibility.

Shockingly, most universities and colleges do not even have accurate data on how many BME staff they employ and on what grades and pay levels.

Only a minority of HE institutions have implemented the national guidance on undertaking equal pay review which was agreed with the trades unions in 2002.

There is more for government to do as well. Staff with a disability and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) staff have gained from enhanced legislation. However, we still have no idea how many LGBT staff are employed in our sectors, many feel it unsafe to ‘come out’ at work and many report harassment and abuse. Meanwhile the limited cover in the *Disability Discrimination Act* means that while those ‘with a disability’ are offered protection, those who are indirectly discriminated against on the grounds of a disability, such as carers, are not.

It is about time universities and colleges took equality seriously and spent more time rectifying such discrimination rather than just writing about it. And with equality issues so high up the political agenda, now is the time for government and politicians to take the lead and demand change from public service employers.

Did you know?

- In HE, the gender pay gap is 15% and the ethnicity pay gap is 13%
- In HE the higher the grade, the lower the proportion of women and BME staff: in pre-1992 universities women represent 46% of entry level lecturers but only 13% of professors and in post-1992, 53% of lecturers and only 30% of heads of department
- 48% of women academics in HE are employed on a fixed-term contract compared with 38% of men
- Only 1.5% of academics have a disability compared to 20% of those of working-age

We ask you to join us in calling for:

- The HE and FE sectors to set themselves the ambition of becoming standard-bearers of equality with the best records of any sector of the economy
- A commitment from Government to take a lead in equalities and demand concrete action from university and college employers
- Every university and college to commit to carrying out equal pay audits as a matter of urgency and at regular intervals thereafter
- The Government to broaden the *Disability Discrimination Act* to cover those indirectly discriminated against on the grounds of disability