

General Election 2017

A manifesto from the University and College Union

April 2017

To realise the UK's full economic potential and build a fairer society, the next government must invest in education, reduce barriers to learning and support people to fulfil their potential, whatever their age, background or location.

Education is a cornerstone of every successful economy and society. Learning boosts peoples' skills, increases their employability, enhances individual wellbeing and improves productivity, bringing benefits both to the individual and to society as a whole.

The University and College Union (UCU) supports a vision of lifelong learning which allows everyone to access the learning they need, whenever they need it. As people live longer and our working lives are shaped more radically by globalisation and technology, it's imperative that people can develop their skills in order to adapt and thrive.

To realise the UK's full economic potential and build a fairer society, the next government must invest in education, reduce barriers to learning and support people to fulfil their potential, whatever their age, background or location.

Ahead of the general election on 8 June, this manifesto sets out some areas for reform of post-school education. We urge politicians to work with us in developing a vision for a learning society which works for everyone.

CHANGE HOW POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION IS FUNDED

Public funding for UK tertiary education lags behind the OECD average, while tuition fees for higher education in the UK are at an all-time high, and students in further education also increasingly have to shoulder large debts in order to fund their studies. Education is a public good that should be publicly funded, and cost should never be a barrier to participating in education.

What should we do?

- Increase public investment in tertiary education to at least the OECD average.
- Abolish tuition fees in further and higher education.
- Explore alternative funding options including a Business Education Tax.

OPPOSE MARKETISATION IN EDUCATION

Profit has no place in education, yet more and more for-profit education companies are operating in UK further and higher education, several of which have been involved

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in scandals around phantom students, fraud and poor quality delivery. In higher education, the government has also tried to link further fee rises to a Teaching Excellence Framework, and open up the market to more competition, both of which risk the quality and international reputation of the sector.

What should we do?

- Oppose for-profit provision within further and higher education.
- Oppose the Teaching Excellence Framework and any proposed link to tuition fees.

PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF INTERNATIONAL STAFF AND STUDENTS

Our global workforce is a key strength of the education sector, and international staff and students make a hugely valuable contribution to our colleges and universities. However, the government's focus on reducing net migration, along with the refusal to guarantee the rights of European citizens working in the UK after Brexit, means the future for international staff and students is uncertain. To avoid a brain drain of international talent, we need to send the message that staff and students from around the world are welcome in the UK.

What should we do?

- Immediately guarantee the right to remain of EU citizens working and studying in the UK.
- Remove international students from the net migration target.

INVEST IN THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

If we want a skilled society, we need to ensure that local education institutions can attract and retain the best teachers and support staff to help people learn and reap the benefits of education. In recent years, falling education budgets have led to staff cuts, rising workloads and widespread use of insecure employment contracts in education; we need a more sustainable approach to building the education workforce of the future and better protection for employment rights.

What should we do?

- Invest in 15,000 further education teaching staff to support over 250,000 more learners into education.
- Eradicate zero-hours contracts and strengthen duties on employers to offer secure employment.
- Promote action on excessive workloads.

PROTECT LOCAL ACCESS TO ADULT LEARNING

Since 2009, over a million adult learners have been lost and waiting lists for courses like ESOL have soared as college and local authority budgets have been squeezed. The number of part-time learners has also fallen dramatically as tuition fees have risen. Adult learning can be a lifeline and provide a stepping stone into further learning and employment, but it's at risk of being sidelined by a narrow focus on apprenticeships and technical education. Devolution of skills funding offers great opportunities to improve local access, but the skills budget needs to be protected and educators need to have a proper say in shaping local provision.

Education is an important part of successfully rehabilitating offenders and reducing their risk of reoffending. However, too many offenders can't access the high level qualifications which employers value, and extra investment is needed to ensure that they can leave custody ready to enter the workplace.

What should we do?

- Increase funding for basic skills so that more learners can benefit.
- Develop a national ESOL strategy to ensure that everyone who needs them can access to English classes.
- Increase support for flexible and part-time learning.
- Ensure that devolved skills funding is ring fenced for education and that educators have an input on local skills decisions.

MAKE UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS FAIRER

Despite various policies designed to help disadvantaged young people into higher education, the UK's top universities are still dominated by students from relatively advantaged backgrounds. This is in no small part because the current university admissions system is based on highly inaccurate predicted grades. We need a fairer, more transparent system based on actual achievement rather than estimates of potential.

What should we do?

- Ban the use of unconditional offers based on predicted grades.
- Explore a move to post-qualification admissions (PQA) which allows students to be selected on the basis of their results rather than predicted grades.

INVEST MORE IN PRISON EDUCATION

Education is an important part of successfully rehabilitating offenders and reducing their risk of reoffending. However, too many offenders can't access the high level qualifications which employers value, and extra investment is needed to ensure that they can leave custody ready to enter the workplace. Action is also needed to address health and safety concerns within prisons and ensure that teachers can deliver learning safely within the prison environment.

What should we do?

- Commit an additional £30 million to prison education to deliver more high level qualifications which support effective rehabilitation.
- Take action to improve health and safety for prison personnel.

INCREASE INVESTMENT IN RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Spending on research and development (R&D) as a proportion of UK GDP is only 1.7% – much lower than the EU average (2.3%) and competitor countries like China (3.1%) – despite innovation being a key driver of productivity and economic growth. Research funding is also increasingly concentrated in a few institutions, limiting the opportunities for talented researchers elsewhere. To unlock the full potential of the UK's research base and ensure that all parts of the UK can play their part in driving innovation and growth, we must invest more in research and ensure that funding is distributed more evenly.

What should we do?

- Commit to a UK spend of 2.4% of GDP on R&D, in line with the OECD average.
- Review the increasing concentration of research funding across a small range of universities.

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EXPAND AND REFORM THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY

The new apprenticeship levy helps to ensure that employers are paying their share for the supply of skilled employees they benefit from. However, the current levy only applies to 2% of all UK employers and the money raised can only be spent on apprenticeships rather than other work based learning. There is potential to expand and reform the levy to increase the share of skills learning funded by employers.

What should we do?

- Expand the levy to cover more employers, with different sized employers paying amounts proportionate to their total pay bill.
- Reform the levy so that it can also be used for other types of work based learning which is valued by employers.

REVIEW THE PREVENT STRATEGY

The Prevent duty requires university and college staff to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism', but in practice it risks undermining the relationship between staff and students, restricting academic freedom and stifling the right to question and challenge ideas with which we disagree. Staff take their duty of care towards students seriously, but the ability to debate difficult issues and question received wisdom within our education institutions is essential.

What should we do?

- Undertake a comprehensive review of the Prevent strategy in education.

ABOUT UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) is the UK's largest union and professional association for staff working in further and higher education. We represent around 100,000 academic and professional staff in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK. We campaign for greater public investment in post-school education as well as for fair pay and decent working conditions for our members.