



# Transforming Post-16 Education

A PROGRESSIVE MANIFESTO FROM  
THE UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE UNION



Learning transforms lives. It broadens horizons, enhances individual wellbeing and improves productivity – with clear benefits for individuals, employers and society as a whole.

Post-16 education is central to the success of the UK economy, but it also sits at the heart of social justice. Our world is changing fast; people who are living longer and facing the effects of globalisation, technology and climate change need to be able to return to learning throughout their lives to help them adapt and thrive.

If our post-16 education system is to fulfil its potential for the next decade and beyond, we need to ensure that high-quality learning opportunities are accessible for all – regardless of age, background or circumstance. We also need to ensure that careers in higher, further, adult and prison education across the UK are sustainable and attractive.

UCU has identified six areas where we would like to see firm commitments from all UK political parties as we approach the general election.

# 1 PRIORITISE LONG-TERM INVESTMENT IN POST-16 EDUCATION

Over the last decade, the nature and scale of government funding for post-16 education has changed dramatically. Government funding for further education has fallen steeply – most notably in the form of a 45% real-terms cut to the adult education budget – resulting in the loss of over 24,000 teaching staff from the sector. In higher education, funding per student has fallen by 5% since 2012 and universities face significant uncertainty in relation to European research funding as a result of Brexit.



Higher and further education have both become much more reliant on individual students taking on loans to pay for their studies, while maintenance grants have been scrapped and austerity has made it harder for many students to make ends meet.

We need to ensure that cost is never a barrier to participation in education, and that all parts of the education system are funded fairly and sustainably for the future. We are calling for all parties to commit to:

- scrapping tuition fee loans in further and higher education and replacing fees with direct grant funding
- restoring the adult education budget to 2010 levels
- reintroducing maintenance grants for students in further and higher education
- committing to long-term membership of the EU Horizon Europe programme
- reaffirming the commitment to spending at least 2.4% of GDP on research and development in line with the OECD average.

# 2 MAKE INTERNATIONAL STAFF AND STUDENTS WELCOME IN THE UK

The UK's colleges and universities are global institutions, enriched by the contributions of thousands of migrant staff and students. All migrants deserve respect and dignity, but the approach of recent governments to immigration and the divisive rhetoric around Brexit has made too many feel that they are simply not welcome here.

The next government has both a moral and a practical imperative to strike a different tone. Almost a third (31%) of academic staff in UK universities, and almost half (48%) of research-only staff at Russell Group institutions, are international. If we are to avoid a brain drain of international talent we must work to end the 'hostile environment', tackle



the practical and financial barriers faced by migrants, and send a clear message that we want staff and students from around the world to work and study in the UK.

Staff and students also benefit hugely from freedom of movement and programmes like Erasmus+ which supports knowledge and experience to be shared internationally; retaining and extending these benefits should be a key goal. We are calling for all parties to commit to:

- scrapping the net migration target, the minimum salary threshold for skilled workers and prohibitive visa costs
- protecting and extending freedom of movement
- ensuring the immigration system supports staff to spend extended periods overseas for research and knowledge exchange
- retaining access to the Erasmus+ scheme
- ending the 'hostile environment' and requirements on university staff to monitor visa compliance.

## 3 TACKLE THE MANAGERIALIST CULTURE IN EDUCATION

Moves by recent governments to promote competition in education have deepened the damaging culture of managerialism within our colleges and universities, undermining the professionalism of academic staff and the collegiality of our institutions.

In higher education, the Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework undermine professional autonomy, promote a reductive approach to quality assurance, and are deeply unpopular with staff. In further education, too, staff are clear that Ofsted's approach to accountability is simply not fit for purpose. In prisons, current commissioning arrangements mean that prison educators have little control over what and how they can deliver to meet the needs of learners.

We need a fresh approach that recognises the authority of educators in understanding how best to meet the needs of students, and promotes collaboration and partnership as the foundation for high-quality education. We are calling for all parties to commit to:

- scrapping damaging metrics, including the Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework
- abolishing Ofsted and working with trade unions to develop a more constructive alternative

- empowering prison educators by ditching the current commissioning model and shifting oversight of prison education to sit alongside other parts of the education system.



## 4 MAKE UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS FAIRER

Despite different initiatives aimed at helping disadvantaged young people into higher education, most of the UK's top universities are still dominated by students from relatively privileged backgrounds.

Our approach to university admissions is partly to blame. In most of the UK offers are based on highly inaccurate predicted grades – this system has allowed controversial unconditional offers to proliferate and made the UK a global outlier in terms of our approach. If we want to level the playing field and bring the whole of the UK into line with the rest of the world, we need a fairer, more transparent system based on actual achievement rather than vague estimates of potential.

Our research also suggests that the most disadvantaged young people are less likely to have received any information or guidance about post-18 education opportunities than those from more privileged backgrounds. We need a much greater focus on the provision of high-quality, independent information, advice and guidance to ensure that all students are being properly supported with important decisions about their future. We are calling for all parties to commit to:

- banning the use of unconditional offers
- moving towards a post-qualification admissions (PQA) system where offers are based on achievement rather than predictions
- increasing funding for information, advice and guidance to ensure that all students and potential students can access support.

## 5 PUT SKILLS AT THE HEART OF THE CLIMATE TRANSITION

UCU is fully behind the global action against the climate crisis; our planet's future is at risk and now is the time for bold action. The work done by environmentalists like Greta Thunberg and by students around the world has been inspirational and we now need to see a coherent response from our government to the threats posed by climate change.





Those working in post-16 education will have a key role to play. The green skills gap is a major stumbling block to delivering a Just Transition to a zero-carbon economy. The next government will need to create thousands of new climate jobs and apprenticeships; college and university staff must be at the heart of providing the skills that are needed to support this.

We also need to see a greater focus on embedding sustainable development into the curriculum and ensuring all education institutions are taking responsibility for their own carbon footprint. UCU is calling for all parties to commit to:

- introducing a green new deal to encourage a sustainable industrial strategy and workforce
- promoting and funding skills training and job creation to meet the needs of Britain's rapidly growing low-carbon sectors and to green the whole economy
- embedding sustainable development across the curriculum at all levels
- demanding all colleges and universities develop local carbon reduction strategies.

## 6 PROPERLY INVEST IN THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Ensuring that careers in post-16 education are attractive and sustainable is crucial for the stability and effectiveness of our education system. However, the status of education staff has been progressively undermined in recent years by austerity-driven attacks on pay and pensions, spiralling workloads, widespread insecure employment and a failure to effectively tackle equality pay gaps.

The statistics are stark. The average working week in both further and higher education is now over 50 hours. Almost half (46%) of universities and 60% of colleges currently use zero-hours contracts to deliver teaching, while over two-thirds (68%) of research staff are on fixed term contracts. In universities, the gender pay gaps stands at around 15%, while black academic staff are paid 14% less than their white peers. College incorporation has led to erosion in pay and conditions, contributing to a pay gap between school and college teachers of over £7,000.

We need a fairer, more sustainable approach with better protection for the employment rights and conditions of staff across the education sector. We are calling for all parties to commit to:

- eradicating the use of zero-hours contracts

- strengthening requirements on publicly-funded education providers to provide secure employment contracts and address equality pay gaps
- promoting effective action on excessive workloads
- increasing transparency around senior pay in colleges and universities, and linking it to staff pay
- Empowering staff and students by strengthening their role in education governance
- returning further education colleges to local democratic control and closing the £7,000 pay gap between school and college teachers
- commissioning a review of pension governance to ensure that all schemes are fully accountable to their members.



## ABOUT UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) is the UK's largest trade union and professional association for staff working in further and higher education. We represent over 110,000 academic and professional staff in universities, colleges, prisons, adult and community education providers, 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.



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