

19 October 2021

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State,

Now that conference season is over for the year, I am writing to you on behalf of the University and College Union to welcome you to your new role and to request a meeting at your earliest convenience.

As you will be aware, UCU is the largest post-school education union in the UK, representing over 120,000 academic and professional support staff in colleges, universities, adult education settings and prisons.

Your government has set out a 'levelling-up' agenda for the country and I'm sure you will agree that each part of the education sector has a crucial role to play in delivering on this plan. Further, higher, adult and prison education all play an important part in ensuring that people's learning journeys continue successfully long beyond their school years, and that people can update their skills and abilities throughout their lives.

It is vital to the success of these sectors that careers in higher, further, adult and prison education remain attractive and sustainable. As you may know, UCU has this week begun balloting members over attacks on pensions, pay and conditions in higher education, while members at several further education have recently been taking strike action over pay. Industrial action is never taken lightly and I would urge you to use your good offices to encourage employers to take the necessary steps to end these disputes as soon as possible.

As we approach the comprehensive spending review, I hope you will also ensure that post-16 education is at the forefront of the department's plans, and that proper, secure funding for the full range of educational opportunities is a priority for your department's negotiations.

I have set out below some of the key areas of concern for our members around which we hope to engage with you in the coming months.

Higher education

In higher education, I have to be clear that tuition fee reductions proposed in the Augar review would represent the worst of all worlds, as students would still be graduating with significant debt while institutional income would fall, affecting quality. It would also do nothing to address the significant depressive impact

which tuition fees have had on part time and mature participation in higher education.

Simply lowering the threshold at which graduates pay back student loans would also be a regressive move that risks putting less privileged students off from entering higher education. The half-way house proposed by Augur will potentially make a bad situation worse and now really is the time to properly consider scrapping tuition fees entirely and replacing this with long-term, secure public funding.

There is now a pressing need to ensure adequate long-term resourcing for the full range of higher education opportunities, along with secure funding and proper investment in staff to maintain quality across the sector.

The government should do more to recognise and publicly promote the value of all subjects, including arts and humanities, and must reverse the recent cut to high-cost grant funding for creative arts subjects. This shortsighted plan threatens the health and accessibility of the entertainment and education sectors, jeopardises the livelihoods of creative workers, and narrows training opportunities for future generations.

Further education

In order to ensure that further education can continue to attract and retain the staff it needs to play a central role in upskilling the nation, it is vital that the issue of pay is addressed as a matter of urgency. The pockets of investment which the sector has seen in recent years have not translated into improvements in pay and conditions for staff, over 24,000 of whom have chosen to leave the sector over the last decade. The pay gap between teachers in schools and colleges now stands at over £9,000 and this will continue to undermine the effectiveness of the sector if it is not closed.

UCU is concerned that the model of FE expansion outlined by the government is based on extending a system of fees and loans into our colleges instead of increasing public investment. Tuition fees in FE have a poor record of success and this model will not provide colleges with the stability they need to effectively respond to the needs of their local communities. Equally, those wishing to learn new skills and retrain will be put off by a system based on debt.

It is also important that the government's funding model recognises the value of diverse qualification and subject options within FE. The defunding of BTECs has already been condemned by stakeholders from across the sector and Peers from across the political divide during recent debates on the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. This and the lack of support for creative arts subjects as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee are both major barriers to engagement and progression.

Cuts to overseas aid

Investment in research and development has rightly been identified as a priority by the Johnson government, and the pandemic has brought home just how vital the UK's research base is in meeting many of the global challenges we face today. The government should therefore reverse the recent cut to Overseas

Development Aid funding for UKRI projects, which undermine the UK's role in combatting the world's most pressing challenges such as infectious diseases, food security and climate change, and recommit to the target of increasing R&D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

Reform of university admissions

Your government's recent consultation on admissions reform put forward two choices for admissions reform: post-qualification application and post qualification offers. Whilst many respondents to the consultation have favoured the latter model, we fear this is simply because it was deemed to cause less disruption. The danger in this model is that it does nothing to improve choice-making or transparency for students. Worse still, the main flaw of the current system would not be resolved. Students would still be required to make their choices on the basis of predicted grades – a process that our research has shown to be a poor proxy for final performance.

We hope that you will seize this opportunity for bold reform rather than minor tweaks to the current model. Students have shown during the pandemic that they won't simply sit back and accept a system they believe to be unfair. Moving to a simpler system where students apply to higher education after they have received their final grades, underpinned by better information and advice, is in everyone's interest.

Initial teacher education

The government's planned changes to ITE are destabilising and unnecessary. Forcing providers to participate in a new accreditation process will damage existing successful ITE partnerships and reduce the number of providers, affecting student choice and the ability of small schools and providers to participate in ITE. We very are concerned by the fact that many successful providers have already signaled their intention to withdraw from the process if the proposals go ahead. This will have a devastating impact on future teacher supply and is a huge risk to take. The responses to the recent consultation on these proposals will demonstrate the strength of feeling from across the sector about these proposals and we urge the government to take note of the opposition to them.

Freedom of speech

UCU is clear that the Freedom of Speech (Higher Education) Bill is wrong-headed and will not solve the issues it seeks to address. Instead it risks placing a significant financial burden on institutions which may in itself have a chilling effect on free speech on campus.

Furthermore, the bill fails to get to grips with the corrosive effects of casualisation, managerialism and policies such as Prevent and the Research Excellence Framework which hamper the ability of staff to exercise their academic freedom. The uncomfortable truth is that widespread precarious employment strips academics of the ability to speak and research freely, and curtails chances for career development. I would therefore call on you to push for withdrawal of the bill and for further engagement with the sector to address the real challenges to academic freedom faced by staff.

Prison Education

The prison education sector remains underfunded and blighted by a commissioning model that fails both learners, staff and society at large. UCU supports a reform of prison education that places equal access at its heart, together with a more efficient use of public funds and investment to make learning spaces safe and fit for purpose.

I hope you will take on board the views of staff and students working and studying in post-16 education and I look forward to meeting with you in person as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr Jo Grady
UCU general secretary