

Review of the teaching funding method

Second consultation on changes to the method

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the second stage of the HEFCE review of the teaching funding method.

Before commenting on the specific technical issues arising out of the consultation we would like to make some general comments about the levels of funding in higher education. Although the method for allocating funding is important it cannot address the underlying problems of under-funding, which will not be resolved simply through the introduction of variable undergraduate fees. Although we welcome proposals to make allocations more transparent, fairer and more evidence-based, the changes may largely result in reshuffling pots of money across the sector. Also, whilst we are concerned that the overall balance of funding allocation is got right, it is clear that there is a consensus in the sector that teaching is currently under-funded, and reliance on funding sources that will net varying amounts to different institutions, per student, is likely to skew the results away from HEFCE strategic priorities. Overall, we believe that financial pressures on staff and institutions are leading to a reduction in the quality of the student learning experience and assessment; the technical proposals outlined in the current HEFCE review will do little to address these systemic problems.

In terms of the HEFCE review of the teaching funding method we would like to respond to the three main areas of the review:

(A) Development of a system of targeted allocations (paragraphs 22-57).

We support the development of a system of targeted allocations as they are likely to increase transparency in the funding process (though once again we would point out that it is likely to have a neutral effect in terms of overall funding). A greater use of targeted allocations may enable HEFCE to make more strategic interventions into the higher education landscape, for example, helping to ensure a proper regional spread of strategically important or vulnerable subjects. We also welcome the potential of targeted allocations to improve support for HEIs which bear a heavy financial burden because of their student profile and related WP activities.

At the same time, we do not want to see the creation of new funding schemes that require separate bids from institutions. Separate bidding schemes are likely to increase the bureaucratic burdens on HEIs and contradict the 'mainstreaming' approach recommended by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group.

In relation to other recurrent funding and in particular funding for high cost and vulnerable subjects (paragraph 58f) we are concerned about the reduction in student numbers for computer science in recent years, and suggest that this subject is also considered vulnerable.

(B) Recognising flexible study patterns (paragraphs 59-70).

The UCU strongly supports the government's policy of widening participation in higher education, including the emphasis on "student achievement and success" as well as raising aspirations and improving admissions. We agree that the current treatment of "non-completion" discriminates against those institutions that do most to widen participation, and perpetuates an understanding of student success that fails to recognise different patterns of attendance in the context of lifelong learning, part-time, work based and flexible study.

At the same time, we share the concerns of many within the sector about too closely linking academic success and funding. Pressure from performance indicators such as degree classifications and student retention rates are already leading to compromises over academic standards¹ and we do not want to see further pressures on staff. We, therefore, support the compromise proposal adopted by HEFCE in paragraph 65 (i.e. in order to be counted, a student who withdraws from their course of study must have completed modules equivalent to a minimum of 20 credits (0.16 FTE)).

(C) Further application to teaching of the Transparent Approach to Costing (paragraphs 71-84).

The UCU believes that the TRAC methodology has the potential to provide more accurate information on the real costs of HE teaching provision (as it has done in relation to the costs of research). At the same time, we must insist that the data collection process is as non-bureaucratic as possible. Our experience of the TRAC and similar costing methods in HE is that they place a considerable administrative burden on staff. Also, staff are often very concerned about the possible use of the information gathered for purposes for which it was not intended. Proper safeguards, including appropriate guarantees of confidentiality, should be put in place so that staff have confidence in the value of the exercise and

¹A number of surveys have highlighted unacceptable pressures on academic staff to award higher grades and to avoid failing students for primarily financial or PR reasons. See, for example, Phil Baty (2004) 'Poll reveals pressure to dumb down' *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 November 2004; Phil Baty (2006) 'Academia has sold out, 72% believe', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 November 2006.

participate willingly. The UCU would also wish to be consulted on the detail of any extension of TRAC to Further Education Colleges.

UCU responses to specific consultation questions

1. Do you agree that we should create a variable targeted allocation to contribute to the additional costs of part-time undergraduate students?

Yes – providing it is evaluated by 2009-10.

2. Do you agree that we should create a fixed targeted allocation for old and historic buildings?

No – a fixed allocation may be too unwieldy.

3. Do you agree that we should create a variable targeted allocation to contribute to the additional costs of foundation degrees?

Yes.

4. Do you agree that we should create a variable targeted allocation to contribute to the costs of accelerated and intensive provision?

Although we welcome the general movement towards a more targeted funding allocation, we have major concerns about the development of two year degrees. Our concerns relate both to the quality of the provision and the impact on lecturers' working conditions.

5. Do you agree with our proposal to count for funding purposes the modules completed by students who complete something other than their initial study intentions for the year?

Yes – provided it is only for a limited amount of money.

6. Do you agree with our proposal to benchmark the actual costs of teaching submitted by institutions, in order to understand the total costs of HE teaching in England?

Yes – but cost centres may not be sufficiently differentiated, particularly in arts and humanities and social sciences.

7. Do you have any further comments?

We are concerned about the general levels of funding for teaching in higher education (see introductory comments).