

## HE FUNDING

### Defend funds for lifelong learning

**Funding for lifelong learning is under attack once again – this time in higher education; UCU policy officer ROB COPELAND reports on the campaign against the withdrawal of funds from students with qualifications**

In recent years, UCU members have become wearily accustomed to attacks on adult education. Funding cuts, for example in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), have often been introduced with little or no consultation with staff and students.

Despite this, there was genuine shock in September when the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) announced a major change in funding for lifelong learning in English higher education.

Completely out of the blue, ministers instructed the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to phase out funding for students who are studying at a level equivalent to or below a qualification they already hold. Over the next three years, the plan is to 'shift' funding of £100 million from people studying for so-called 'ELQs' to first-time applicants.

For instance, someone who already has an honours degree and who is studying for a second one would count as studying for an ELQ. In contrast, a student who has a foundation degree and who is now studying for an honours degree would not count as studying for an ELQ, as this student is aiming for a higher level qualification.

Ministers say they want to spend the £100 million on widening participation and the Leitch ('employer engagement') agenda, but this announcement will impact adversely on both.

The modern labour market requires up-skilling and re-skilling. ELQ students are the very ones retraining, updating professional skills and accessing the lifelong learning which Gordon Brown and Lord Leitch espouse. The removal of public funding will not only affect 'second degree' students, but a very wide range of students and universities in England. It will include many involved in short courses, part-time, vocational and professional education and training.

The government's suggestion that these students will all get funding from their employers to undertake further studies is not borne out by current statistics or evidence. Significant

numbers of adults, particularly women returners, are likely to discontinue their lifelong learning because they can't afford to pay full market fees.

VICTIMS Specialist part-time higher education institutions, namely the Open University and Birkbeck College, are key victims of the ELQ proposal.

UCU analysis has shown that the Open University is set to lose over £31.6 million in teaching funding by 2014-15, while Birkbeck will suffer a 38% cut in its teaching grant (£7.8 million) over the same period. Unsurprisingly, the local UCU branches are very concerned about the impact on jobs, particularly the large numbers of hourly paid lecturers teaching on adult courses. The ELQ proposals are also seen as a fundamental attack on the liberal ethos of these unique institutions.

Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, president of Birkbeck UCU, fears that: 'particular types of courses will be eliminated, especially "short" courses and others that do not lead to a degree, and that the faculty of lifelong learning will lose its historic mission to provide broad liberal arts education to adults.'

Birkbeck UCU is working with the union's London region, the Open University UCU and the national union, as well as with their local managements, to oppose the government's cuts.

It is not just an issue affecting these two institutions. Universities such as London Metropolitan, Wolverhampton and Sunderland – who do wonderful work to support widening participation and employment engagement – will also experience significant reductions in public funding.

Continuing education departments and centres, often located in 'research-led' universities as well as post-1992 institutions, are seen as particularly vulnerable. Unless there are major changes to the government's approach, there is a fear that these specialist departments may simply disappear or be profoundly damaged.

'There simply won't be the infrastructure and expertise to offer this expanded provision for adults,' warns Professor K L Oglesby from the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL). 'The university centres for lifelong learning will have disappeared, and with them that enormous pool of expertise, experience and commitment which has done so much for so many adults for so long.'

Staff, students and 26 vice-chancellors have all come out publicly against the ELQ proposals. Even the head of the CBI, Richard Lambert, has voiced major concerns. 'To put it politely, it seemed hard to reconcile with the government's broader policy objectives and the lifelong learning agenda,' he said.

People are also angry that there was no prior consultation or parliamentary debate in advance of this massive policy shift. Instead, the HEFCE is consulting only over how the

decision is to be implemented, including which subject areas will be exempt from the changes.

THE CAMPAIGN Alongside key allies such as UALL and Million+, the think tank representing post-1992 universities, UCU has taken the campaign into parliament and the media. We've coordinated letters to the national and local press, provided briefing materials for MPs, and hosted a well-attended parliamentary meeting in December.

As a result of this pressure, 211 MPs have signed an early day motion (EDM) calling on the government: 'to consider ways in which it can minimise the damage this measure will do to lifelong learning and the delivery of the Leitch agenda objectives.' As UC went to press, this had the highest number of signatories for any current EDM.

The issue has also attracted over 17,000 signatures on a petition on the Downing Street website, initiated by the president of the students' union at the Open University (<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/ELQFunding>).

And now the House of Commons' select committee has announced an inquiry into the whole ELQ policy – UCU will be one of the organisations giving oral evidence to MPs.

So far, DIUS has continued to take a hard line in public over this issue, although there has been some talk of further concessions. For example, a number of organisations are calling on the funding council to exempt all students who return to study five years after their first degree, and to widen the subject exemptions to include vocational subjects such as psychology, management and computing.

While further exemptions would be welcome, the UCU believes that the government's ELQ policy is wrong in principle, as well as in terms of its impact on staff, students and institutions.

The government's recent decision to review its funding policy on ESOL in further education was welcomed by the UCU. We hope that ministers are also willing to take a fresh look at their proposed policy on equivalent or lower qualifications in higher education.

---

#### KEEP UP THE PRESSURE

We need to keep up the pressure on ministers and force them to abandon this policy. If you haven't signed the petition or your MP is not one of the signatories to EDM317, please go to the 'ELQ' page on the UCU website: [www.ucu.org.uk](http://www.ucu.org.uk)

*UC magazine, January 2008*