

UCU briefing on the Higher Education Green Paper

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in higher and further education throughout the UK.

UCU response to HE Green Paper

UCU believes that the effectiveness and success of a quality assessment regime, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), will depend heavily on the contributions of academic and academic-related staff. So far, their perspectives have been largely ignored in current debates and we are concerned about the “absence of the academic” from recent higher education policy.

Everyone recognises the need for high quality teaching, but unless government places staff at the centre of the process and addresses underlying issues like casualisation, low status of teaching, lack of career progression and lack of funding, the green paper is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives.

Teaching, alongside high quality research, are at the heart of higher education. Indeed the existing high standards in England are one of the reasons so many overseas students continue to choose to study here.

We believe initiatives aimed at “improving” still further the quality of teaching should be judged against the following key principles:

- That teaching is an inclusive, collegial endeavour
- That collaborative, peer-based methods are vital for ensuring academic quality
- That staff need sufficient time to focus on small group teaching and individual students needs
- That good teaching is underpinned by good working conditions for all staff, including better job security
- That good teaching needs to be properly and fairly recognised in academic career structures

In addition to this, we have concerns that the TEF may over time lead to the complete deregulation of student fees, leading to a relative reduction in funding for many institutions, including many of those with the best record in enabling students from non-traditional backgrounds to attend university.

Teaching Excellence Framework

- Full details of the TEF are being consulted on until January, but the green paper proposes using measures such as **student satisfaction, student retention rates** and **graduate job prospects** to measure teaching quality
- Staff training, engagement and career progression are also highlighted as possible measures along with a suggestion for a metric related to **'proportion of staff on permanent contracts'**
- Proposals would enable institutions which prove they provide high quality teaching to **increase tuition fees in line with inflation**
- The TEF will also encourage providers to **adopt the grade point average (GPA)** alongside traditional degree classifications

UCU response

- Alongside others, we are very concerned about the **proposal to the link the TEF to tuition fee rises**, the timescale for which has put great pressure on the sector to design, pilot and evaluate a new framework
- Longer-term, the link between the TEF and tuition fees risks creating a **high-stakes assessment regime** which will increase the likelihood of institutional 'game-playing' at the expense of students themselves
- TEF will **allow institutions that do well in widening participation to charge more**, but this increase in the cost of university could have the perverse and surely unintended consequence of putting off the very students that the proposal is aimed at helping, therefore disproportionately benefitting institutions that make relatively smaller progress
- Quality teaching is underpinned by **decent working conditions and job security for staff** and any system aimed at improving teaching must examine the relationship between the **widespread job insecurity** 'enjoyed' by a large proportion of academic staff and teaching quality
- **Temporary contract working is endemic across UK higher education**, with 69,000 (43%) out of a total of 161,000 contracted academic staff on non-permanent contracts. Among 40,000 teaching only staff, 29,435 (73%) have non-permanent contracts. These figures do not include the 75,000 so called 'atypical' academic staff who are also largely engaged in teaching but who are usually employed only on an as and when basis and have little access to CPD, career development or other scholarship opportunities
- **Job insecurity also impacts on the quality of the student learning experience**, for example, on marking and assessment processes and the opportunities for staff on casual contracts to access professional development

Merger of HEFCE and OFFA to create an Office for Students

- New body will coordinate existing functions **on quality, teaching excellence, market entry and social mobility**
- Specific duty to **"promote the student interest"** and ensure value for money for students and taxpayers
- New powers to require higher education bodies to **release relevant data** – in the hope that this will better inform students and help to widen participation for disadvantaged students

UCU response

- We are disappointed at the **lack of emphasis in the Green Paper on part time students**, numbers of which have collapsed by more than 40% since 2010. The government must recognise that cost is a key factor for such potential students, many of whom are in employment, and provide increased financial support
- The objective to "recognise those institutions that do most to **welcome students from a range of backgrounds and support their retention** and progression to further study or a

graduate job” is admirable; however, if improvements in student outcomes data such as retention rates and employability data is used, this may actually disadvantage universities that already focus on widening participation, part-time students and experimental and innovative provision

- UCU has been a strong supporter of the **work of the OFFA in encouraging institutions to take widening participation seriously**. We are very concerned that OFFA will lose its influence if it is subsumed within the proposed Office for Students, and while we welcome the Prime Minister’s clear commitment to increase the number of disadvantaged students who attend universities, we are worried that the proposed Social Mobility Advisory Group will – no doubt unintentionally - undermine the previous work of OFFA
- HEFCE has had an extremely poor record in either analysing or addressing issues relating to staff which have a primary impact upon students such as casualisation, academic careers, student-staff ratios to name but three. **Our hope would be that the new OfS would see these issues and the role of staff themselves as fundamental to the success of higher education** rather than ignoring them

Private providers

- Create a level playing field in the regulation of new and established universities and a **single gateway for new providers** that want to enter the sector
- Could result in all institutions being exempted from FOI request as is currently the case for private providers
- **Speed up the process for new providers** to gain powers to award their own degrees in less than four years and achieve university status in less than five
- Proposals to protect students if an institution exits the market, including all providers having a **contingency plan** to ensure students can continue to be taught and receive financial support in case of market exit

UCU response

- UCU has consistently warned that the **rapid expansion of private providers** has been a disaster and has urged the government to take extra checks, not seek to allow more into the system
- Between 2010/11 and 2013/14, the number of students claiming support for courses at alternative providers rose from 7,000 to 53,000 while the amount of taxpayers' money paid in loans and grants rose from around £50m to around £675m. Yet a number of private colleges in receipt of this money have been involved in **scandals around phantom students, fraud and low quality of education provided**
- One of the best ways the government could improve academic quality and standards is to **restrict, rather than increase, the role of for-profit, private providers**
- **Removal of the FOI requirement would be disastrous** for the ability to challenge higher education institutions and would have a negative effect on openness and transparency
- The removal of the student number criterion for university title could lead to a proliferation of small institutions and **fundamentally challenge the concept of what a university is**
- The quicker and easier it becomes to award degrees/become a university, the more likely the sector is at **threat from for-profit organisations looking to move into the market for financial gain** rather than motivated by a desire to provide an excellent education

Social Mobility

- Creation of a new “**Social Mobility Advisory Group**” headed by Universities UK, reporting to the Universities Minister, will be created
- This will report on the progress towards **doubling the proportion of disadvantaged students entering higher** education and increasing the number of BME students by 20% by 2020
- The government will also strengthen guidance to the Director of Fair Access, encouraging **greater emphasis on successful outcomes for under-represented groups**

UCU response

- UCU would **question why UUK has been given the key role in the advisory group**, and ask whether an independent organisation such as Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA), who are not mentioned, could have been given the role
- One of the key problems in both social mobility and boosting productivity has been the failure to address the **important role of part-time students**
- **Improvements in part time study** should feature as a target for the social mobility advisory group
- We welcome proposals to establish a power to require HE bodies to provide relevant data and information to help better target efforts on widening access. We hope that the proposals will not negatively impact on the previous good work of OFFA as the **availability of such data should help promote trust in the admissions system**

Research funding

- **Create a simpler system** of research funding to **increase its strategic impact** of the research base
- Maintain the **dual support funding system** of the Haldane principle and scientific excellence
- Reduce the burden and costs of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), while retaining its strengths
- Consider the recommendations of the **Nurse Review**

UCU response

- We recognise the **importance of research** to the sector and are disappointed that no attempt has been made to examine the **positive relationship between teaching and research**
- There needs to be **greater synergy between teaching and research** and we call on the funding bodies to include this as one of the criteria in their ongoing policy reviews
- We welcome the stated objective “to build a culture where teaching has equal status with research, with great teachers enjoying the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as great researchers”, although a **strict division between ‘great teachers’ and ‘great researchers’** underplays the ways in which teaching and research can and do interact with one another