

DOWNLOADABLE RESPONSE BOOKLET FOR THE

# **THE HIGHER EDUCATION BIG CONVERSATION HAVE YOUR SAY**

The consultation document can be downloaded from the DEL website:

<http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/minister-statements/hebigconversation.htm>

## Respondent Information Form

Please complete the following information.

**Question One:**

**NAME:**

University and College Union

**Question Two:**

**E-MAIL ADDRESS:**

belfast@ucu.org.uk

### **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION**

The Department will publish a summary of responses following completion of the consultation process. Your response, and all other responses to the consultation, may be disclosed on request. The Department can only refuse to disclose information in exceptional circumstances. Any automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will be taken to apply only to the information in your response for which confidentiality has been specifically requested. Before you submit your response, please read the paragraph below on the confidentiality of consultations and it will provide you with guidance on the legal position regarding any information given by you in response to this consultation.

The Department will handle any personal data you provide appropriately in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. The Freedom of Information Act gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority, namely, the Department in this case. The right of access to information includes information provided in response to a consultation. The Department cannot automatically consider as confidential, any information supplied to it in response to a consultation. However, the Department does have the responsibility to decide whether any information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential.

**Responses can be submitted electronically via e-mail or sent to the following address:**

Higher Education Consultation Team  
Department for Employment and Learning  
Adelaide House 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
39-49 Adelaide Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8FD  
E-mail: hefpb@delni.gov.uk

by **5pm on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2015**

For further information:

Tel: (028) 902 57756  
Email: hefpb@delni.gov.uk

The Department cannot accept responses by telephone. General enquiry calls may be made to the above number.

**Question Three:**

**Which of the following best describes you?**

Current higher education student:

Prospective higher education student:

Former higher education student:

Parent:

An employee of the higher education sector:

Employer:

A representative of an organisation (please specify): \*

University and College Union (UCU)

Other (please specify):

**Please tick this box if you do not wish for your response to be published.**

**Please use the comment box below to explain why.**

# **THE HIGHER EDUCATION BIG CONVERSATION HAVE YOUR SAY**

The consultation will be open for submissions from 6<sup>th</sup> October 2015 until 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2015. The consultation document can be downloaded from the DEL website at: <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/ministerstatements/hebigconversation.htm>

Please use additional pages should you run out of space while answering any of the questions.

## THEME ONE: SKILLS AND ECONOMY

### Question Four:

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports Northern Ireland's skills needs?

Very sufficiently

Sufficiently

Unsure

Insufficiently

Very insufficiently

Please explain your answer.

Currently higher education makes a significant contribution to skill needs. Students graduating from the universities in both academic and vocational programmes learn both specific and transferable skills invaluable to successful labour market participation.

It is clear that employers recognise the 'added value' of higher education in terms of meeting their skills needs; the 2014 UKCES [Employer Perspectives Survey](#) showed that NI employers found HE leavers to be better prepared for employment than school and college leavers (see slide 18).

Although sometimes difficult to measure, there are demonstrable examples from the universities of how higher education boosts the skill supply to the local economy. The Knowledge Transfer Centre at Queens has facilitated partnership projects with a diverse range of SME's and larger corporations including Bombardier and Cayon Europe, the latter increasing turnover from £9.5m to £12m as a result of collaboration with Queens. This provides a gateway of graduates from university into career based employment.

Importantly, UCU believes that higher education is a central driver of social and economic fairness, a community good especially precious in the post conflict context of Northern Ireland. HE provision creates hope, an avenue out of poverty and expansion of knowledge beyond the narrow confines of sectarian ideologies that have dominated the Province.

### Question Five:

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports Northern Ireland's wider economic development?

Very sufficiently

Sufficiently

Unsure

Insufficiently

Very insufficiently

Please explain your answer.

The Higher Education Big Conversation 'Have Your Say' document highlights examples of how the HE sector is supporting economic development – by showcasing spin-out companies, funding for world-class research, intellectual property and so on. It makes the point that NI's universities and colleges secured over £90million each year in funding through these kinds of commercial interactions with businesses and wider communities. It should be remembered that the universities generate a significant amount of revenue beyond that which is provided by DEL; in the case of Queens, only 33% of the university's income comes from government funding.

The increasing focus on income generation outside of government funding may serve to undermine the universal remit of higher education – to reflect society in full, not just the needs of the private sector. This is not to undermine the priority of the HE sector in terms of the knowledge economy – but to highlight that a university's role is much wider than this emphasis on skills would suggest. The removal by Queen's University of its funding and support for the annual international arts festival, which survived throughout the 'Troubles' is an example of this. The decision was a clear indicator of the university's shift away from its responsibility as a mirror of society; such decisions are ignorant of the contribution that the Arts and social sciences have to the economy.

For example, UK wide [research of graduate employment](#) reveals that students from the social sciences have slightly higher employability rates from those who studied STEM subjects - a difference of 6.4%. Arts and STEM employability rates had less than 1% difference these were the results found via a longitudinal study conducted by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research. UCU therefore believes that the diversity of subject provision needs to be considered within the big conversation, as different curriculum areas each have a distinct role to play in supporting economic development.

**Question Six:**

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will intensify Northern Ireland's skills shortages?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

The consultation document states that *"In the current academic year alone, some 540 student places and some 446 staff posts have been lost at Queen's and Ulster University"*. In addition, there have been voluntary exit schemes rolled out in both Stranmillis and St Mary's.

It is clear reduced budgets are already effecting negative consequences and policy U-turns in funding choice. The decision of Ulster University to close the School of Modern Languages is a case in point. As recently as March 2015 Ulster University submitted a paper to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment into Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax. In this document they stated "Graduates fluent in modern languages play an important part in Northern Ireland's attractiveness for direct foreign investments and our credentials and teaching Chinese responds to the opportunity presented by the world's fast growing community." It is difficult to comprehend how that situation could change so dramatically between March and September.

Similarly, degree courses with excellent employability rates such as Housing Management and Transportation are also earmarked for closure.

**Question Seven:**

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will discourage potential investors from coming to Northern Ireland?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

UCU believes disinvestment in higher education will inevitably dissuade potential investors from basing operations in Northern Ireland. The universities and colleges are the institutions that provide knowledge and skills into society. Without a skilled and educated workforce there is no incentive for businesses to locate here.

Disinvestment in education for young people is particularly dangerous in a post-conflict environment. A continued reduction of student places and with it reduced opportunities for social mobility is likely to make the next generation more vulnerable to recruitment by those who believe society's ills can be solved through sectarian politics brought about by violent means. If there is a return to terrorism, businesses will not invest in N. Ireland, and disinvestment is more likely.

**Question Eight:**

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will hinder Northern Ireland's wider economic development?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

The UK spends just 0.7% of GDP on public funding for tertiary education, less than many global competitors ([OECD, Education at a Glance, 2013, p148](#)). Spending on research is also below average for the European Union (*ibid*, p185).

While EU countries are increasing investment in HE, in Northern Ireland DEL decreased its grant funding from 2009/10 to 2014/15 by over 13% (*HE Big Conversation, Fact Sheet 2*). The Barcelona target of 3% of GDP investment in research and 2% investment in higher education was proposed by the European Commission in 2002. Since then various economic crises have impacted across Europe, however, other EU countries have responded by increasing investment in higher education and scrapping tuition fees – recognising that a highly educated workforce interfaces directly with economic development.

**Question Nine:**

Are there alternative models of higher education delivery which could better support Northern Ireland's skills needs and wider economic development in the future?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Yes, a progressive taxation system, please see answers at 17 & 20.

## THEME TWO: QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

### Question Ten:

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports high quality higher education provision in Northern Ireland?

Very sufficiently

Sufficiently

Unsure

Insufficiently

Very insufficiently

Please explain your answer.

UCU believes the ability of the universities to maintain quality education provision is being damaged by funding cuts which serves to limit the range of courses and student places available.

However, there are decisions being taken at university level that UCU believes adversely impact upon the higher education system in Northern Ireland. Both the universities here claim they do not use zero hour contracts, however, UCU is aware that Queens employ significant numbers of research assistants and teaching assistants on a contract for services basis. In most cases these individuals are highly qualified, but the terms of the contracts cap the amount that can be earned to poverty levels. UCU does not believe that professional academics should be employed on this basis and in so doing engenders a situation that undermines the possibility for continuity in the students' learning experience. Individuals employed on service contracts are continually looking elsewhere for more stable and better employment opportunities.

The rise of so-called performance management in terms of research income at Queens is likely to negatively impact upon teaching delivery. Queens is attempting to link staff appraisal directly into the capability procedure for academics who do not meet onerous and unreasonable income targets for research. Potentially, many excellent university lecturers could see their employment terminated if they do not obtain research grants; this is likely to reduce the time lecturers can dedicate to their students and education delivery.

Similarly, Ulster University has announced plans to make redundant full time permanent lecturers and teach out courses using hourly paid casual contracts. Under these circumstances, quality of education provision cannot be guaranteed and is likely to be compromised.

**Question Eleven:**

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system supports fair access to, and widens participation in, higher education in Northern Ireland?

Very sufficiently

Sufficiently

Unsure

Insufficiently

Very insufficiently

Please explain your answer.

A reduction in 2015/16 of £16m in public funding, 540 less academic places and around 450 staff posts lost across the sector (DEL Fact Sheet 3) does not support fair access or to help widen participation in HE in Northern Ireland – nor does the statement that ‘over the next three years over 1900 undergraduate places will be lost’. The six FE colleges that offer HE courses – and deliver about a fifth of all HE courses in NI (Fact sheet 2) are often overlooked and undervalued in this discourse. FE colleges have a crucial function in terms of access to and widening participation in HE here – however, that too is being squeezed.

The change to EMA eligibility in 2013 was a further attack on enabling young people from low income households to pursue HE options. The unclear situation in respect of tuition fees in NI will further have a detrimental effect on young people’s aspirations. UCU opposes any fee increase and believes fees should be abolished; capable young people should be admitted to university on their ability to learn not ability to pay.

Government cuts to benefits, to FE and to HE funding, tuition fees, reduction in EMA – and various other aspects of cross-departmental policy – all combine to stymie educational aspiration within communities – particularly the poorest ones. Efforts made since the Good Friday Agreement to support access to and widen participation in higher education in NI, look set to be diminished considerably due to these budget cuts to both FE and HE.

**Question Twelve:**

To what extent do you think that the existing higher education system enables social mobility more broadly in Northern Ireland?

Very sufficiently

Sufficiently

Unsure

Insufficiently

Very insufficiently

Please explain your answer.

UCU is concerned that Higher Education provision in Northern Ireland has become Belfast centric. UU's move to Belfast combined with the Belfast Met's expansion into higher education raises serious questions about access to HE for those outside of the centre. UU at Derry and Coleraine must attract further investment to address this issue. Similarly, UCU would support the expansion of HE provision in FE colleges in localities where geographical constraints means there is no reasonable prospect of students undertaking courses in the universities.

HEI's proposals to plug public funding gaps by attracting more international students to study here negates the fact that most of those students will take their skills and qualifications back to their countries of origin.

Negative publicity around cuts to courses and places also makes leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere a more appealing prospect to many capable young people, with 64% of those that do leaving for good, meaning social mobility within the Province is fairly limited.

### Question Thirteen:

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will undermine the quality of Northern Ireland's higher education system, in both teaching and research?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

Disinvestment in HE will seriously undermine the quality of NI's HE system, in both teaching and research. UCU's policy paper on teaching quality and student learning (*Beyond the Consumerist agenda: teaching quality and the 'student experience' in HE*, 2014), argued that government policy on research had been 'dominated by a conservative, piecemeal approach'. Despite the Witty Review (2013) which examined the role of universities in generating economic growth and the so-called 'third mission' of universities (that is, knowledge transfer and relationships with SMEs), with regard to research infrastructure, the UCU policy statement '*Seeing the Bigger Picture: the future of UK research and development*' (December 2014) stated 'we have seen savage cuts in capital spending followed by ad hoc, discretionary increases via the UK Research Partnership Investment Fund'. While the responsibility for allocating research funds via the block grant remains a devolved responsibility, the funding stems from the UK-wide research assessment exercise which is problematic.

The UCU's priorities for research includes a long-term investment strategy – that is, a long-term certainty of public investment and increases to the research budget to bring the UK – including Northern Ireland's investment - in line with international R&D averages.

This year, the funding councils are undertaking an operational review of the 2014 REF. While UCU has welcomed this, we are seeking a much wider review of the current funding model. UCU's priorities for research also include strengthening academic freedom in particular, and making NI a more attractive place for research staff, to encourage excellence and innovation.

**Question Fourteen:**

Are there alternative models of higher education funding or delivery which you think could better support high quality higher education provision in Northern Ireland?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

It is imperative that the Department does not view steep increases in tuition fees as the solution to the budget deficit. Many European competitors are offering free higher education (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Finland) and others like France, Italy and Spain have very low fees.

Germany's "Excellence Initiative" is one such example of how an economy can be driven by investment in valuable human resources. The "Excellence Initiative" is being billed as Germany's most important instrument for strengthening higher education there. For the past ten years, it has been using "substantial government funds to support the cultivation of a competitive profile on the one hand and a general increase in the quality of higher education on the other." Its goal is to make "Germany a strong research location with improved international competitiveness".

(<http://222.research-in-germany.or/en>) It has invested 2.7 billion euros in the second phase of its Excellence initiative alone – creating 45 graduate schools, 43 excellence clusters, and 11 institutional strategies. The German Research Foundation (DFG) has created 'ideal conditions for training doctoral students, which include not only a stimulating research environment, but a structured study programme'. Doctoral students are encouraged to develop beyond the confines of their own subjects and to make contacts abroad. The German government has invested heavily in the "Clusters of Excellence" that have become 'beacons of outstanding research'. Under the Excellence Initiative, institutional strategies for the project based expansion of top university research have been devised, implemented, encouraged and funded to enable their growth and sustainability.

This clearly demonstrates that there are alternative strategies to ever increasing tuition fees as a solution to higher education funding.

**Question Fifteen:**

To what extent do you think that disinvestment in higher education will undermine equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland, particularly for people from lower income backgrounds, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

UCU consider it an inevitability that equality of opportunity will be undermined with fewer student places and funding cuts. UCU believes the introduction of tuition fees signalled a bad policy decision. All those who have the ability to benefit from university should have the right to attend, and no-one should be excluded on the grounds of cost.

Foundation degrees and access courses have enabled thousands of people from lower income backgrounds to access higher education. WAPPs (Widening Access and Participation Plans) are required to be produced by higher education providers - this should continue.

**Question Sixteen:**

To what extent do you think that the adoption of exceptional application routes could help to address under-representation in higher education, particularly of disabled students?

Very significantly

Significantly

Unsure

\*

Not significantly

Not at all

Please explain your answer.

HE providers, in addressing their statutory WAPP (Widening Access and Participation Plans) must ensure that under-representation in HE is addressed in detail – in particular in respect of equal and fair access for disabled students.

A report by the NI Human Rights Commission for Queen’s University and the Centre for Children’s Rights – [Education Reform in Northern Ireland – A Human Rights Review](#) - concluded that ‘significant from a human rights perspective will be the impact that policy initiatives have on individuals’ rights to, in and through education if and when they are translated into practice. This will require evaluation and monitoring, with particular attention being paid to the most vulnerable groups of young people, including those with disabilities, Irish Travellers, those in state care and others not educated in mainstream school settings’.

There is significant scope for the HE sector here to adopt a human rights based approach to its policy reform, including a recognition that education is a human right to be enjoyed by all on an equal basis. HE providers, employees and students should be engaged meaningfully in the processes of change and reform.

More broadly, UCU proposes that a key way to ensure fairer and more transparent university admissions would be a move to post qualification admissions (PQA), where offers are made on the basis of actual rather than predicted grades.

**Question Seventeen:**

Are there alternative models of higher education funding or delivery which you think could better support fair access to higher education and equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

UCU believes that while employers benefit enormously from the plentiful supply of graduates, they will not willingly contribute to the infrastructure that creates this supply. Further, with corporate taxation levels lower in the UK than in other comparable economies and a collection shortfall of £8billion a year, we believe scope exists for a modest increase in their tax burden in order to directly support higher education. In particular, UCU is opposed to the ambition of the Northern Ireland Executive to lower corporation tax- UK corporation tax is already amongst the lowest in both the G7 and the G20.

There are other areas of the public realm that business levies can be used to overcome the private sector's unwillingness to pay for services that benefit them. This is not a matter of ideology. London Mayor Boris Johnson is levying a business tax of 2p in the pound to raise £4.1billion to help fund the Crossrail project.

UCU believes that a similar strategy, a Business Education Tax (BET) could solve the higher education funding crisis by increasing the main rate corporation tax. A relatively modest increase in corporation tax paid by NI's largest companies could allow for the abolition of higher education tuition fees while remaining globally competitive. UCU would advocate leaving the small companies' rate unchanged, and tax breaks for those employers who fund their employees to return to education to learn new skills.

**Question Eighteen:**

Do you think that the existing higher education system strikes the right balance between: the quality of provision on the one hand; and the quantity of provision on the other?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Unable to comment without any data or qualitative analysis on which to base a valid commentary.

## THEME THREE: SUSTAINABILITY

### Question Nineteen:

To what extent do you think the existing higher education system in Northern Ireland is sustainable?

Highly sustainable

Sustainable

Unsure

Unsustainable

Highly unsustainable

Please explain your answer.

The existing system is sustainable if the Department is prepared to confront the private sector and force them to contribute to higher education funding for the benefits which they enjoy. Budget cuts effecting course closures, reduction of student places and job losses will undermine the future of the HE sector and weaken the Northern Ireland economy.

**Question Twenty:**

Are there any other models of higher education delivery which you think could better support the needs of Northern Ireland?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Yes, as previously stated UCU is in favour of a Business Education Tax. The union also believes proactive steps must be taken to close tax loopholes and improve collection rates.

UCU believes that a Business Education Tax would enable Northern Ireland to:

- Make access to higher education free
- Reduce student debt and re-incentivise participation
- Reduce the cost to tax payers of servicing student loans
- Increase the amount available for universities to invest
- Increase the engagement of the corporate sector with higher education
- Promote 'returning to learn' schemes in the private sector in return for tax breaks
- Guarantee the plentiful supply of graduates our economy requires
- Leave Northern Ireland with a competitive corporate tax structure and protect small businesses from a tax increase
- Provide a powerful incentive for government to collect all unpaid corporation tax.

**Question Twenty-One:**

Are there any other models of higher education funding which you think could better support the needs of Northern Ireland?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please explain your answer.

Please see answers at 17 & 20.

### **Question Twenty-Two:**

Bearing in mind ongoing constraints on public spending in Northern Ireland, how do you think Northern Ireland's higher education system could be put on a sustainable footing?

The key to sustainability is an ongoing commitment to a publicly funded higher education through a progressive taxation system. UCU believe this is the only viable strategy for economic stability and growth for a very small country/devolved region of the UK.

There is a need for a change in political emphasis and we believe the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department has choices. In seeking the solution for the long term sustainability of the HE sector, the Department needs to think more creatively and reject the free market ideology that is having devastating consequences for higher education in England. Scotland also has a devolved budget and has chosen to protect higher education; we must do the same.

## **Further Information**

Higher Education Consultation Team  
Department for Employment and Learning  
Adelaide House 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
39-49 Adelaide Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8FD

Tel: (028) 902 57756

Email: [hefpb@delni.gov.uk](mailto:hefpb@delni.gov.uk)

Web:

<http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/ministerstatements/hebigconversation.htm>