

UCU briefing on the Higher Education White Paper

May 2016

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.

The HE [White Paper](#), *Success as knowledge economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*, was published on 16 May. In broad terms, the proposals are similar to the ones outlined in the HE [Green Paper](#) in November 2015.¹ While the primary focus of the White Paper is on England, a number of the proposals, particularly in relation to the research architecture, have UK-wide implications.²

In essence, the White Paper argues that “insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice” are the main weaknesses of the higher education system in England. UCU rejects this analysis and the idea that private, for-profit providers and increased tuition fees are the best ways to drive up quality. On the contrary, recent evidence from the USA and the UK suggests that market-based reforms are likely to deliver worse outcomes and value for students, employers and taxpayers.

In addition, we believe that the effectiveness and success of the higher education system depends on the contributions of academic and academic-related staff. The voice of staff, however, is missing from the White Paper, including the proposals for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which offers very little for the people who either teach or support learning in higher education.

We are also concerned that the core proposals in the White Paper (on market entry, the TEF and the higher education architecture) will result in further fragmentation between teaching, scholarship and research.

As part of our campaign, UCU will continue to make the case for higher education as an essential public good and the centrality of staff to high-quality teaching and research.

¹ UCU’s detailed response to the Green Paper is available [here](#).

² In addition, the devolved governments have given their consent for institutions from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to participate in the first year of the TEF (pp. 46).

New providers and deregulation

Chapter one proposes new measures to increase competition within the higher education sector, via a simplified regulatory system and easier access for new private providers.

The big change from the Green Paper is that new providers will be able to offer their own degrees from *day one*, albeit on a probationary basis.

New providers will be able to apply for *full* degree-awarding powers after only three years and then university title after only another three years. The Government is also proposing to reduce the numbers threshold (currently 1,000 students) required for applications for university title.

Another significant change is that new providers will now be able to charge tuition fees of up to £9,000 rather than the current £6,000. For the first time, they will also be able to access block grant funding for teaching and research.

Chapter one also proposes significant changes for existing public universities and colleges. For example, the government will deregulate the constitutional arrangements that govern Higher Education Corporations (HECs), thus making it easier for some post-1992 universities to transform their corporate structure.

Finally, as part of its plans to facilitate market exit, all approved providers will need to have a 'student protection' plan in place, whose objective will be to ensure that students are able to continue to achieve their academic outcomes in the event of the provider not being able to fully deliver their course.

UCU response

Making it easier for new private providers to obtain degree awarding powers is at odds with the primacy of quality. New institutions will not have to prove their quality and robustness through building up a track record. Having a probationary period gives scope for institutions to fail to meet the required standard after already having taught and awarded degrees leaving it too late to protect these students from poor quality providers.

We are also concerned about the removal of minimum student numbers from the criteria for university title as it is likely to result in increased fragmentation of the sector. Moreover, a proliferation of new providers without regard to the devolution of skills strategies and funding to cities in England will impede their ability to ensure a joined-up approach to provision for learners in their areas.

We acknowledge that private colleges and universities have been a feature of our HE system for a long time. However we are strongly of the opinion that higher education providers should be **not-for-profit** bodies because these pose a far lower risk to the sector. Making it easier for for-profit organisations to award degrees or become universities exposes the sector to greater risk from those motivated to move into the market predominantly for financial gain.

We believe 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 given the scandals around phantom students, fraud and low quality of education following the rapid increase in taxpayers' money paid to private colleges since 2010/11.

Given the patchy track record of providers with a for-profit corporate structure, we feel that the interests of students, staff and the wider public are best served by retaining restrictions on the capacity of Higher Education Corporations to become for-profit entities.

Teaching Excellence Framework

Chapter two focuses mainly on the government's plans for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

The TEF will be implemented in stages. In Year One, all providers with satisfactory quality assessments will automatically achieve a rating of 'Meets Expectations'. This will allow them to increase their tuition fees by inflation.

In future years, the TEF will assess universities according to their performance on **student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment**, while also drawing on qualitative institutional submissions and expert judgements.

Year Two of TEF will now be a "trial year" in order to test the framework before it is linked to "differential financial incentives" in 2019-20.

The Government has published a [technical consultation](#) to help design the second year of the TEF.

UCU response

We remain deeply concerned by any proposed link between quality as defined in the TEF and additional income, and will oppose any move to further increase the lifetime cost of higher education, which already sits at over £50,000 for the poorest undergraduates.

Everyone recognises the need to support high-quality teaching, but it is hard to see how many of the measures which have been proposed for the TEF will either measure quality or improve it. In particular, we remain concerned about the use of flawed, proxy metrics as indicators of 'teaching quality' and the increased bureaucracy and game playing that will result in the implementation of the TEF.

In addition, we believe that if the higher education sector is serious about supporting and valuing high-quality teaching, then academics must be at the centre of that process and governments and universities must address underlying issues such as casualisation, workloads and career progression.

In the TEF technical consultation we will continue to highlight the importance of decent working conditions and job security for staff as one of the essential conditions for quality teaching. This is reflected in our new campaign, aimed at students, entitled "*My working environment is your learning environment*".

Social mobility

Universities will be required to publish the gender, ethnicity and social backgrounds of their student intake to “shine a light on their admissions processes”.

The TEF core metrics will be broken down to include those of disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Government is also seeking views on [accelerated courses and switching university or degrees](#), including the current barriers around credit transfer and accumulation.

UCU response

While increased reporting requirements on universities are to be welcomed, the government must do more to address the persistent barriers to higher education for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. This must include greater support for Further Education Colleges in their plans to widen access to college-based higher education.

We need tougher action on universities who are missing access targets, better support for part-time and mature study, and a national inquiry on our broken admissions system to ensure fair access for all.

We support a *genuine* review of the credit transfer and accumulation system in England, especially for mature and part-time learners.

Office for Students

Chapter three deals mainly with proposed changes to the higher education, research and innovation architecture.

A new **Office for Students (OfS)**, designed to promote choice and competition, will replace the learning and teaching functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The OfS will be a non-departmental public body and ministers will be responsible for appointing its Chair, Chief Executive and non-executive Board members.

It will mostly be funded by registration fees from HE providers, with the Government providing a smaller level of resource.

UCU response

We are concerned that the OfS will focus on facilitating market access for private providers, rather than being an organisation which reflects the real interests of students or with teaching quality enhancement at the heart of its mission.

In order to reflect the diversity of the higher education system, we call for proper student and staff representation on the OfS.

Research architecture

A new research and innovation body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) will allocate funding for research and innovation. UKRI will incorporate the functions of the seven

Research Councils, Innovate UK, and HEFCE's research funding functions. The latter will be known as 'Research England'.

UKRI will manage funds with a "cross-disciplinary impact" and a "common research fund" as proposed by the [Nurse review](#).

The government has emphasised its support for the current '**dual support**' system of research grants and quality-related funding, including the proposal for this to be enshrined in legislation.

UCU response

Although we welcome the proposal to legislate to protect the dual support system, it is too early to judge whether these arrangements will be sufficient to prevent ministerial interference in the research funding process.

Similarly, despite the reference to ensuring a "co-ordinated and strategic approach to the funding of teaching and research in England", we remain concerned about the institutional separation between research and teaching within the new structure.

We call for the UKRI's remit to include the promotion of sustainable research careers.

For more information about anything contained in this briefing, please contact Rob Copeland at rcopeland@ucu.org.uk.