

Higher Education and Research Bill

House of Commons briefing from the University and College Union (UCU) – April 2017

The University and College Union (UCU) is the UK's largest trade union for academics and academic-related staff in higher and further education, representing over 60,000 members working in UK universities. We also represent over 30,000 members working in further education colleges, many of whom teach undergraduate and other HE courses.

UCU is concerned that the Higher Education and Research Bill will not achieve the government's stated aim of improving the quality of, and access to, higher education in the interests of students.

Following the vote for Brexit, UCU also believes that this is the wrong time for a major overhaul of the sector, and has called for the bill to be halted.

Throughout the progress of the bill so far **UCU** has:

- Opposed measures which open the sector up to marketisation and make it **easier for new providers to award their own degrees and gain university title**, especially where those providers are operating for-profit;
- Opposed measures which give the Secretary of State/Office for Students powers which **threaten university autonomy and academic freedom**;
- Opposed the use of a **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)** as system for rating universities and determining tuition fee levels;
- Called for **increased parliamentary scrutiny** of any measures which would be used for tuition fee variation;
- Called for **stronger representation of staff** within the regulatory structures, and increasing the **duty to consult staff** representatives on future policy decisions;
- Pushed for **more openness and information around workforce issues** such as use of non-permanent contracts and staff to student ratios;
- Pushed for **stronger requirements on institutions to widen participation** and promote access.

Amendments in the House of Lords

Although UCU remains opposed to the bill overall, we have **welcomed** a number of Lords amendments which seek to address the main concerns raised by staff and improve the bill. We are now calling on MPs of all parties to stand against any attempts to dilute improvements that have already been debated and agreed to.

We were pleased that opposition amendments around tuition fees, TEF ratings, degree awarding powers and international students were passed, and that campaigning from the sector pushed the government to propose further changes to the bill such as placing more emphasis on collaboration and university autonomy.

UCU is encouraging MPs to support the following alterations made by the House of Lords to the original bill:

- Amendment 1: this sets out the functions of universities to include upholding academic freedom, provision of a wide curriculum and opportunities for scholarly research, and contribution to society through the pursuit and application of knowledge.
- Amendment 12: this provides that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) may not be used to set variable rates of tuition fees.
- Amendment 23: this provides that the TEF must not be used to rank higher education providers as had been proposed under the gold, silver and bronze rating system. Peers also agreed that the TEF's current methodology is not clear and robust enough and must now be most closely looked at by both Houses of Parliament.
- Amendment 71 (subsections 12 & 13): before gaining degree-awarding powers, this amendment requires that new providers will need either a track-record of four years working with an existing provider or to satisfy the needs of the Office for Student's Quality Assessment Committee, raising the bar on quality.
- Amendment 156: this removes international students from net migration figures and gives protection to university staff from restrictive immigration controls.

The government has published a number of amendments in lieu of these changes, but UCU is concerned that these are not sufficiently robust to protect the quality and international reputation of the sector. We therefore urge MPs to retain the Lords amendments when the bill returns to the House of Commons.

If you would like further information about the issues contained in this briefing, please contact the UCU parliamentary team on publicaffairs@ucu.org.uk