Consultation Response: HE Review

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DfE HE review: Review of post-18 education and funding.

Terms of reference and online submission link

This response was led by the BU Policy team (see end of document for contact details).

PART 1: CHOICE AND COMPETITION ACROSS A JOINED-UP POST-18 EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

Q1: This review will look at how Government can ensure that the post-18 education system is joined up and supported by a funding system that works for students and taxpayers. The panel would like to understand your priorities. What, if any, are your principal concerns with the current post-18 education and funding system?

To inform our response at BU we conducted a staff and student survey. Most of the 85 respondents (74) were staff, with 9 home students and 1 international student also responding. Although a small sample size, our staff are not only staff experienced in working in HE, and knowledgeable about students but are also taxpayers and many will be parents. We have also discussed the review and these questions with our Student's Union at Bournemouth University (SUBU) and we will refer to their separate response in a number of places.

We asked respondents for their top 3 concerns and the top concerns were:

- Funding - 55% of respondents selected "how students fund their living expenses" and 21% selected "how students contribute to their tuition fees"

  The large proportion of respondents highlighting living costs reflects concerns raised by the NUS, UUK and others about living costs.

  - Several respondents raised concerns elsewhere in our survey not just about disadvantaged students in this context but also students whose parents, although assessed to make a contribution to living expenses, in fact do not or cannot do so (these students make up a high proportion of applications to our hardship fund).
  - Comments were also made that a full loan is sometimes inadequate in any event. These issues will also be raised by SUBU who have analysed living costs and compared them to the full loan.
  - A large number of students work while at university – this has benefits for the student in terms of experience as well as enabling them to support themselves but if students work too many hours it can have a serious impact on their academic success – this is described in more detail in the 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey by HEPI and the Higher Education Academy (Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman, HEPI / HEA 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey, HEPI Paper 96, June 2017 p 25: http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-Final-Report.pdf):

    > "Employment status is also a key differentiator, with students who spend a lot of their time in paid employment less likely to report a gain in their learning outcomes, compared to those who have fewer employment commitments. This finding is logical in that large amounts of time spent in employment may put pressure on time available for learning or, crucially, other extracurricular activities. This matches analysis conducted in the HEA's 2016 UK Engagement Survey (UKES), which highlighted how paid employment does not link as strongly to skills gain as other non-learning activities such as volunteering or caring (Neves, J (2016). Student engagement and skills development. York: Higher Education Academy.)."

- Outcomes: 41% said "whether the system delivers the skills, knowledge and attributes that the country needs" and 26% said "how employable a degree will make me"
  - At BU we focus on programmes that bring together research and education with practice. The links with industry and practice are an integral part of study at BU – for example all of our undergraduate students have the opportunity to undertake a placement and in in 2017/18, 84% of them did.

- However, it is important to note that this does not mean that all our students go on to employment in a field directly related to their programme of study. This is not failure - 2017/18 Unistats data shows BU graduates have near upper-quartile starting salaries and 2016 Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data showed that 67% of BU graduates are in employment one year after graduation against 56% across English providers. But it reflects the fact that even at a university like BU, where industry engagement and experience is central to the student experience, students choose a wide range of roles after university – their university experience has equipped them for the workplace generally, has given them transferrable skills and attributes, and they go on to use these successfully in their employment.
- So while there is a concern amongst our respondents, and expressed by employers, about whether post-18 education when taken as whole is delivering the skills, attributes and knowledge required by the country needs, we suggest that this does not mean that there should be a focus on purely vocational programmes and education at the cost of a wider offering. It also means that arts, humanities and social sciences are important to society, even if they do not lead obviously or directly to a particular career.

- Access and participation: 31% said "how to widen participation and ensure good outcomes for all students" and 22% said "how the system works for part-time and/or mature students".

  These matters are discussed more in our responses to questions in Part 2.

Q2: How do people make choices about what to study after 18? What information do they use and how do they choose one route over another: for instance, between academic, technical and vocational routes?

Respondents to our internal survey were able to give more than one answer. The most frequent responses to the questions about how choices are made and how applicants choose one route over another related to advice at school, family and friends, career plans and subject interest and aptitude. In terms of the choice of route, a number of respondents also mentioned raised social expectations (9 responses) and affordability ({9 responses).

When asked about what information people used, the most frequent responses from our respondents (in descending order) were:

- university marketing and open days
- family and friends
- research on the internet and social media
- advice at school

This view is consistent with the research by the previous government: BIS analysis of Applicant views on Teaching Quality in Higher Education, May 2016 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-quality-in-higher-education-applicant-and-graduate-views). This highlights the importance of the course content and the visit to the institution.

Bournemouth University's own evidence gathering shows that few students are aware of the Unistats tool or confirm that they have used it (when asked, typically less than a third of our open day visitors stated that they knew of the tool or made use of it). In addition, Bournemouth University web analytics data for the year ending 31 August 2015 showed that of the 670,000 sessions which involved a view of an Undergraduate course, just 1.7% (11,000) viewed the 'Course Information Stats' page which provides the supplementary information to the data presented in the Key Information Set (KIS) widget. When questioned about this and the lack of "click through" to Unistats using the KIS widget during the focus groups prospective students felt that the information that was available directly from the course pages on the Bournemouth University website was sufficient.

We refer to research carried out by BU staff (Clive Hunt, Bethan Collins, Alex Wardrop, Maggie Hutchings, Vanessa Heaslip & Colin Pritchard (2018) First- and second-generation design and engineering students: experience, attainment and factors influencing them to attend university, Higher Education Research & Development, 37:1, 30-43, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1342607)

> "Almost three quarters of the second-generation students commented that their family had expected them to go to university compared to around 40% of the parents of the first-generation students. Despite the relatively small sample size, the difference between how first and second generations rated the influence of family was found to be statistically significant."

Another study supports this by comparing WP v non-WP students: Vanessa Heaslip, Jacqui Hewitt-Taylor, Phyllis Alexander, Caroline Ellis-Hill, Seibert-Santos Cassia (2015) What factors influence Fair Access students to consider university and what do they look for?, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Volume 17, Number 4, 67-88 http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.17.4.67)

> "Exploring the degree to which perceptions of others influenced participants' decision making regarding whether to attend university, the questionnaire identified that this was prevalent among both Fair Access and non-Fair Access students. For Fair Access students, parental encouragement (70%), other family member encouragement (69%) and friends or peers and teachers (66%) were each felt to have been encouraging. The findings from the counter questions to these, what discouraged students from attending university, were consistent with the encouragement question, with few citing parents, other family members, friends, or teachers as discouraging. There was a higher rate of encouragement from parents (86%) and families (80%), friends or peers (76%) and a slightly higher rate of encouragement from teachers (70%) mentioned by non-Fair Access Students, compared to their Fair Access counterparts."

All of this evidence suggests that the role of increasingly detailed and complex information is limited, and that social context and local advice is extremely important in student choice. If the government wants to encourage a wider range of choices at 18, there needs to be a focus on culture change across society, with parents, schools and the media engaged.

Q3: How do people make choices later in life about what further study to undertake?

There were two main categories of responses to this question – the outcome in terms of impact on practice/career/employment (32 responses) and the immediate impact on life, work and other commitments (24 responses). 13 responses related to personal satisfaction and development.

This suggests that our respondents believe that a return – in terms of career advancement or personal development, and the balance of that as against the cost, but also the impact on personal life and family in the shorter term, is more important for mature students than for school leavers. As demonstrated by our response to question 2, school leavers may continue into further study partly because of the expectations of others and have a less transactional view of the cost/benefit, value for money than mature students, who have to make a more nuanced calculation because of their personal circumstances.

This is particularly interesting when considering areas of study in which mature students make up a large proportion of the student base, such as nursing – which may explain the drop in applications when the funding system changed. This is something that will need to be considered by the review, especially as these are often not high earning careers and so loans may not be repaid by this group.

Q4: In recent years we have seen continued growth in three-year degrees for 18 year-olds. Does the system offer a comprehensive range of high quality alternative routes for young people who wish to pursue a different path at this age? How can Government encourage provision across a wider range of high quality pathways to advanced academic, technical and vocational qualifications?

Universities do not only offer the "traditional" three year degree described here, and it is important that the focus on alternatives is not all on accelerating those programmes. As we have described in our response to question 1, at BU all of our students have the opportunity to undertake a work placement and this year 84% of them have. 2016/17 HESA data shows that amongst UK universities we have the second highest absolute number of students undertaking a sandwich placement year. We ranked 3rd in the UK for the proportion of our students undertaking placement years. Although we have a particular strength, placement years are found across the sector, along with years abroad.

This is just part of the our approach to combining education with research and practice and industry engagement – for example in 2017/18, 76% of all BU undergraduates were enrolled on programmes with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) recognition, and 62% of current academic staff have recognised professional affiliations. In our view this is an important way to ensure that graduates are employable with transferable skills – even if, as described above, they do not necessarily go on to work in that particular field but go on to succeed in a different career.

We therefore suggest that the review should consider the range and variety of options already available to applicants.

Q5: The majority of universities charge the maximum possible fees for most of their courses and three-year courses remain the norm. How can Government create a more dynamic market in price and provision between universities and across the post-18 education landscape?

We are concerned that there are several unintended consequences of the reforms and changes to the sector over the last few years which are not supporting the diversity and innovation that the government wishes to see. For example, the changes to the Research Excellence Framework are driving a move across the sector to increase the proportion of teaching only staff, rather than staff engaged in teaching and research – this is something that will have a long term and negative effect on education if the trend continues.

The Teaching Excellence Framework – in its current form, may also have a chilling effect on innovation. Despite statements about bronze, silver and gold being levels of excellence rather than grades, the rhetoric about bronze-rated institutions needing to "up their game" has perpetuated a view that bronze means "needs improvement" – this should be addressed.

Given the drivers for choice at 18 that we have described in our response to question 2, we do not believe that differential pricing, even if it was affordable for institutions, would significantly impact student choice. This may be different for mature students, as we have described in our response to question 3, and views have been widely expressed across the sector that cost may be a significant factor for part-time students.

We suggest that rather than focusing on the headline price for tuition fees, the priority of the review should be on living expenses and loan repayment arrangements.

Q6: What barriers do current and new education and training providers face in developing innovative or diversified provision?

Not answered

Q7: How can Government further encourage high-quality further education and higher education provision that is more flexible: for example, part-time, distance learning and commuter study options?

Not answered

Q8: To what extent do funding arrangements for higher education and further education and other post-18 education and training act as incentives or barriers to choice or provision: both at the individual and provider level? How does this impact on the choices made by prospective students and learners? What can Government do to improve incentives and reduce barriers?

We have noted the concern flagged by our survey respondents about living expenses and maintenance support in response to question 1. Mature students are less likely, in our experience, to travel far from home for study, partly because of family or other commitments and partly because of cost. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may also be less likely to travel far from home. If this is the case, their choices have already been limited and funding is a key part of this. We refer to Higher Education Policy Institute / Unite Students, Reality Check: A report on university applicants' attitudes and perceptions, HEPI Paper 97, July 2017 p26:

- "The number of applicants planning to live at home with their parents or guardians is similar to 2016, with 15% in this year's survey.
- Those from socio-economic groups D and E are more likely to live at home, with 25% intending to remain at home
- The main reason for this remains financial (72%) of applicants), with convenience (52%) and proximity to university (48%) the other stated reasons".

The HEPI report goes on to describe some negative impacts on students who live at home – these are described in more detail in the 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey by HEPI and the Higher Education Academy (Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman referred to in question 2 above, page 26:

> "In 2016, we found that students who live in the family home potentially experience some disadvantages in terms of isolation, and this analysis suggests that this could be following through into learning outcomes".

As degree apprenticeships become more widespread and if they are increasingly taken up by school leavers, the comparison between loan funded university programmes and paid employment as part of a degree apprenticeship may mean that applicants who are particularly debt averse - or who are influenced by family and support networks who are themselves debt averse or unable to fund maintenance contributions - may be more likely to take the apprenticeship route. This may have unintended consequences in limiting choices.

PART 2: A SYSTEM THAT IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

Q9: What particular barriers (including financial barriers) do people from disadvantaged backgrounds face in progressing to and succeeding in post-18 education and training?

We asked about barriers when applying to university and to success at university - the most frequent responses to this related to:

- fees and funding arrangements
- lack of confidence or expectations
- lack of support from family – financial or otherwise.

As we have also noted in our response to question 1, some of these barriers are cultural, with the perception of family and friends (and their views on debt and risk amongst other things) playing a significant part in influencing choices made by applicants.

We have referred above in our response to question 8 to research that suggests that students who live at home (a larger proportion of disadvantaged students) may not do as well as students who have travelled to university and in question 1 to the impact that paid work may have on outcomes for students. One part of a solution to this would be a different approach to funding for such students, which would help to overcome the cultural as well as the financial barriers, so that they can choose the programme and institution that is best for them, and engage fully with the experience while they are there. We refer to Learning from Futuretrack: studying and living at home, BIS Research Paper no 167, March 2014 (https://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Futuretrack_BIS_Learning_from_futuretrack_studying_and_living_at_home.pdf) which describes the groups most likely to live at home, the impact on participation and the impact on outcomes for those students.

Our Students' Union (SUBU) have also raised concerns about the availability of paid internships and placements both during and after study as a barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also more generally for students who do not have access to parental support once their studies have finished.

Q10: How should students and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds best receive maintenance support, both from Government and from universities and colleges?

We asked how maintenance support should be provided for disadvantaged students and direct government grants were the most frequent response. However other types of support were also mentioned including

- help with rent
- supermarket vouchers
- funding for IT

At BU we offer bursaries to all students who qualify based on income criteria. This has been successful at BU and we have feedback that it has substantially affected outcomes for students. Although there is little research in this area to support the impact of such schemes – and it is hard to establish what would have happened without the bursary, we believe that this makes a real difference for those students who receive it.

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PART 3: DELIVERING THE SKILLS THE UK NEEDS

Q11: What challenges do post-18 education and training providers face in understanding and responding to the skills needs of the economy: at national, regional and local levels? Which skills, in your view, are in shortest supply across the economy? And which, if any, are in oversupply?

Not answered

Q12: How far does the post-18 education system deliver the advanced technical skills the economy needs? How can Government ensure there is world-class provision of technical education across the country?

Not answered

PART 4: VALUE FOR MONEY FOR GRADUATES AND TAXPAYERS

Q13: How should students and graduates contribute to the cost of their studies, while maintaining the link that those who benefit from post-18 education contribute to its costs? What represents the right balance between students, graduates, employers and the taxpayer?

We asked "Do you agree that graduates should directly contribute to the cost of their education, subject to income?". The responses were:

- Yes – 64% (54 responses)
- No – 36% (30 responses)

We have noted above the potential challenges of a system in which different funding arrangements apply and the potential unintended consequences of degree apprenticeships, for example, in which students not only do not incur a loan but are also paid a salary.

Employers have a role in directly funding studies by sponsoring students - see Making a Success of Employer Sponsored Education by Dave Phoenix, HEPI Report no 83, http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Making-a-success-of-Employer-Sponsored-Education-Report-83.pdf page 7:

> "Across UK universities, 10 per cent of students are sponsored on Employer Sponsored Degrees, a total of 235,000 students".

Q14: What are the most effective ways for the Government and institutions to communicate with students and graduates on the nature and terms of student support?

There was strong feedback from our survey that all stakeholders could communicate better to explain how student support works. It is our belief that the current public narrative about funding arrangements (from all sides) adds to the pressure on students and is therefore unhelpful – for example by focusing on headline interest rates that do not apply in all circumstances and by using the loaded terms "loan" and "debt" without qualification.

If there are no other changes to the funding arrangements for HE, at a minimum we would welcome a recharacterisation of the student loan as a graduate contribution and clearer explanations of how the system works. We refer to the excellent information provided by the Money Saving Expert website and suggest that this approach needs to be adopted and promoted by government.

Q15: What are the best examples of education and training providers ensuring efficiency in the method of course provision while maintaining quality? And what are the challenges in doing this?

Not answered

Q16: What are the ways that Government can increase the value for money of post-18 education?

We asked what value for money was for post-18 education – the most frequent responses related to:

- graduate outcomes including employability and financial returns; and
- high quality education and facilities

However, these responses reflect the potential problem with this question - “value for money” has not been defined in a way that can be universally understood– it means different things to different people at different stages of their university career, and is different for all stakeholders. As written, question 16 is a leading question – leading to a focus on financial return on investment.

For students, value for money may well, as described by many of our respondents, be represented by the educational and wider student experience. When Nicola Dandridge visited our Students' Union (SUBU) to discuss the future priorities of the Office for Students, there was a great deal of feedback on the importance of the wider student experience, including extra-curricular activities – this was also raised with the Minister during his SamOnCampus visit. Such experiences are in our view vital to developing transferable skills, social capital and other “softer” attributes and outcomes from a university experience – and this should not be lost by focussing solely or primarily on the financial return in terms of graduate salary.

There is also a significant cost to student support and welfare activity and outreach and widening participation activities, but these activities have huge value to the individuals affected and to society as a whole. To measure the value for money of such activities, it is important to look at the value added to a student cohort – not just the absolute outcomes, and to consider the impact on the communities affected.

HEFCE's 2017 analysis of the wellbeing of graduates (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2017/201731/) finds that graduates are, on average, happier over their lifetime than non-graduates. The analysis also shows that graduates are more resilient in the face of difficult, and stressful, circumstances such as divorce, unemployment and ill-health. Across three measures of wellbeing – life satisfaction, happiness and worthwhileness – graduates report greater wellbeing even when confronting challenging life events.

These findings contrast with research on the wellbeing of students while they are studying (see the 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey cited above – page 45). Students report greater anxiety and less happiness while studying than young people experience outside higher education. It is possible that students in higher education respond to the pressure of their studies by learning to cope with stress and misfortune to a greater degree than those who are not subject to those pressures. If students learn resilience through their studies, whether it is explicitly taught or not, this may later enable them to better cope in later life. Such things are hard to quantify but have a real impact on society, our communities, and our individual graduates.

For further information on this consultation response contact the policy team (details below).

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