

UCU evidence to the skills commission inquiry: future of the skills system

About UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK.

Core principles of an education and skills System fit for the future

UCU advocates an integrated education and skills system which is:

- **fairly funded** so that cost is never a barrier to participation
- **accessible** to everyone regardless of age, background or circumstance
- **expansive** with support for a broad curriculum and a range of delivery modes
- **flexible** so providers can respond to changing and emerging needs
- **coordinated** with clear links and pathways between different parts of the system
- **accountable** to students, staff and the communities it serves
- **high-quality** with learning at all levels delivered by highly-trained, well-supported professionals.

Fair funding

The principle of fair funding is central to a successful education system. Under the current system the burden of cost for higher education falls heavily on the student while taxpayers and employers pay comparatively little. Not only does this create significant practical and emotional barriers to study, it also leaves many mid-life graduates paying very high marginal tax rates – in effect a tax on participation in education.

Loans have been expanded too in further education as public funding has been cut. Although the government has pledged £500m funding for new T-levels and introduced an apprenticeship levy to support its skills reforms, it has failed to address the wider impacts of the failure to invest more broadly in general further education.

UCU believes a fair system will eliminate tuition fees and make education free at the point of use. A new funding model must reduce the burden on individual students and their

families, and harness the positive fiscal benefits of education to the economy and increased productivity.

Furthermore it is vital that all parts of the education system are equally well supported and recognised for the specific role they play in ensuring a skilled society. Funding for students in further education has lagged that of schools and higher education for many years. UCU research shows that the average university undergraduate attracts over six times the public funding of an adult in further education.

There is also a shortfall in funding for young people studying at college compared to those in schools. According to figures from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the average education funding per 11-16 student is £5,751, but drops to an average of £4,531 for 16-18 education. This has a disproportionately damaging impact on further education colleges, who are unable to cross-subsidise like school sixth-forms. Colleges also cater to many students who, for various reasons, may take longer and require more support to complete their studies.

This funding inequity has directly contributed to a recruitment and retention crisis in further education. As college budgets are cut, they are increasingly unable to compete in terms of pay, and struggle to secure the capacity required to deliver the increasingly high profile skills agenda. Funding shortages have contributed to the loss of 15,000 teaching staff from FE since 2009, and UCU estimates that it would cost around £700m to rebuild this lost capacity in the sector.

Priorities for change

Wholesale funding change for further and higher education is an ambitious goal. UCU is clear that moves to eliminate fees and loans must not lead to any reduction in unit resource, and it is vital that change is managed in such a way as to provide stability for staff and students.

We are also mindful of the need to recognise the different directions that devolved nations and English regions are taking – the need to combine both a comprehensive vision for the education and skills system with local and national democratic accountability.

With those challenges in mind, UCU would wish to see the following areas prioritised:

- abolition of further education loans
- funding parity with schools achieved for further education
- greater support for part time and mature students in higher education
- fee forgiveness for students in key public services
- respect for the independent nature of education provision in the devolved nations and appropriate autonomy in devolved regions

Supporting funding change with structural reform

The education and skills system of the future must aim to ensure that it sets high employment standards. Decent pay and conditions of work are a pre-requisite for high quality provision, yet the increasingly marketised further and higher education sectors are beset by exploitative working practices such as endemic high workloads and casualisation.

Funding for the system should be linked to good employment practices. This should include action to:

- tackle endemic casualisation in the post-compulsory education workforce
- address significant deterioration in the pay and working conditions of staff across the education sector
- improve representation of staff and students on both regulatory bodies and in institutional governance.

These measures are important not only to ensure that working in further and higher education remains an attractive career option, but also for ensuring that students, staff and taxpayers are confident in how institutions are being run.

Removing barriers to access

A fair and just education and skills system must be fully accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

As well as looking at funding we must recognise the associated barriers to learning that exclude many people from participating in education, particularly those who are most in need of the multifaceted benefits that education delivers. To facilitate this, there needs to be a clearer recognition that learning - especially informal and community learning - may not always be specifically designed to improve social or employment-related skills, but can still bring significant value to those who engage in it.

Helping disadvantaged groups take up educational opportunities will require better joined up working, for instance with early and primary years education, with information, advice and guidance services, and health and social care services. Barriers such as childcare need to be addressed, along with issues such as time off work and localisation for those students who find it difficult to travel or engage in large educational institutions.

Pastoral support services in education have been squeezed due to successive budget cuts. This contributes to a decline in education and health outcomes for learners and adds to excessive workload and stress for the teaching staff who are left to pick up the pieces. We need properly funded pastoral support integrated with other support services such as health and social work. Pastoral support is not a 'nice to have' service, it is essential to the success of the education sector, and is particularly important for improving the retention, achievement rates and progression of SEND learners.

Provision and the curriculum must reflect the diversity of needs, backgrounds, circumstances and aspirations of all learners. Investing in high quality staff leads to better learning outcomes, so making sure teachers are fairly remunerated, not on precarious contracts or struggling with excessive workload will have a positive impact. UCU would advocate strongly that we take a broad, expansive view of successful learning that recognises the transformative nature of education.

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