

The Review of Post-18 Education and Funding

Date and Location: 3rd June 2019 at The Royal Society

Chair: The Rt Hon. the Lord Willetts FRS
Chair, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: Dr Philip Augar
Chair, Independent Panel of the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding
Professor Julia Buckingham CBE
Vice-Chancellor and President, Brunel University London and
President-Elect, Universities UK
Stella Mbubaegbu CBE
Principal and Chief Executive, Highbury College, Portsmouth

Panellist: Shakira Martin
President, National Union of Students

Sponsor: The Comino Foundation

Audio Files: www.foundation.org.uk

Hash tag: #fstpost18review . Twitter Handle: @FoundSciTech .

PHILIP AUGAR began with a quote from the Government's Industrial Strategy: "By 2030 we want the UK to be the most innovative country in the world: a home to the most dynamic businesses at the cutting edge of new technologies and processes." The review was the result of a 15-month project set in motion by the Prime Minister in February 2018. It aimed to assess how well the current post-18 education system aligns to the country's needs.

It is the first comprehensive review of tertiary education provision since the Robbins report over half a century ago. Today, around 50% of our young people go to university – and quite a lot is known about them. Not so much is known about the other 50% who follow other educational routes, who may choose to follow further education later in life – or who leave the system. Indeed, some 40% of those who leave school at GCSE never engage in education afterwards.

He said the panel was shocked by the decline in the Further Education. Funding

cuts were leading to an increasing skills gap and social injustice. There are less than 200,000 people studying at Levels 4 and 5, while the contrast to Higher Education is stark. There are over 2 million full and part time adult further education students, although there is still concern about the proportion of those going into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

Comparison with our international competitors is sobering. In Germany, 20% of 25 year-olds have a higher technical qualification: in the UK, the figure is just 4%. The panel had begun by examining the present income-contingent loan system. This shares the costs between the state (in the form of loan write-off) and the student. Its introduction, some 20 years ago, facilitated the expansion of FE. The panel believes the principle of sharing the costs is correct.

The increase in tuition fees in 2012 was also, in principle, correct, but there were different consequences across the teaching bands.

While in general tuition fees tripled, the lowest cost subjects saw no benefit under the new arrangements. Higher cost subjects got a higher fee, but a lower grant. This resulted in distortions in university spending on different subjects. The Russell Group, for example, stated that this has meant significant under-funding for clinical and lab-based subjects.

In order to address the issues raised, the review panel made a series of recommendations for Higher Education, including:

- The tuition fee should be capped at £7,500 by 2021-22
- Government should meet the shortfall arising
- Specialist institutions should be protected from the impact.

PROFESSOR JULIA BUCKINGHAM, President-Elect of Universities UK, praised the review panel for taking a very joined-up approach to tertiary education, looking at quality, access and choice. They had, she said, considered a vast amount of evidence.

The review had offered an opportunity to ensure that the sector was properly resourced, especially given the increasing demand for tertiary education (with student numbers anticipated to grow by 600,000 by 2030). She hoped that there would be greater opportunities for Higher and Further Education to work together in the future.

One of the main headlines had been the proposed cut in tuition fees which would lead, on its own, to an £1.8 billion cut per year in funding for universities. Such a decision would impact on students and staff, on the local communities in which they are based, as well as the UK's position as a global leader in education.

While Universities UK would welcome the proposed Government investment to cover the shortfall, it would be important for the Treasury to guarantee funding into the future – and in the present political climate, that was not certain.

Professor Buckingham was particularly concerned that funding for practical subjects would be cut with consequent impacts on the quality of provision. Exposing students to research is a core part of the role of universities. As well as training the next generation of researchers, this also inculcates the intellectual skills sought by employers.

While the recommendation on the re-introduction of means-tested maintenance grants and a lowering of interest rates on loans was welcome, the increased payback term means that, on average, students will end up paying back more in total. The return to means-tested maintenance grants is very welcome and a key

enabler of social mobility. However the proposed changes to the loan system appear regressive and will benefit only high earners; those who enter less well paid professions, such as teaching or nursing, will end up paying considerably more than they do now.

The review only covers England, but tertiary education needs to be considered in the context of all four countries of the Union. Students must be able to choose the right course in the right place for them.

There are obvious issues that need to be carefully considered, such as establishing a credit system that supports the increased move to modular learning. In addition, Universities UK is particularly concerned about the proposal to eliminate support for foundation level.

STELLA MBUBAEGBU, Principal of Highbury College Portsmouth, spoke about the experience of the 50% of students who do not go to university, many of whom come to the Further Education sector. She said it is desperately unfair that some young people have a huge slice of the cake while others have a sliver.

She said that there was a sense of excitement in the FE sector following the publication of the review. The argument for more funding has been accepted and the review's report sets out how a realignment can be achieved.

She noted that the description of FE as the 'Cinderella sector' was plain wrong: there is no glass slipper, no Prince Charming and no fairy godmother. She added that FE does not expect a 'happy ever after' outcome but does want everyone to work together to achieve change. The recommendations in the review must be taken forward.

A new narrative is needed: not about Cinderellas but about a Camelot Age of life-long learning.

The President of the National Union of Students (NUS), SHAKIRA MARTIN, in responding to the presentations, noted that there was a great deal to be welcomed in the review. However, she said, the devil is always in the detail. Coming from an FE background, she was delighted that the sector is finally receiving the recognition it deserves and the recommendation of a £1 billion cash injection is really good news. The review has also put the needs of the student back on the political agenda.

However, the review recommends a complicated series of changes which, if all are implemented at the same time, will benefit the richest part of the population most.

She said that Further Education had really changed her life. But most of the media were focussing on

the review's proposals for Higher Education. She concluded that education was not just about the 50% who go to university but also those that do not. She asked that the HE sector stepped up to support the case for FE too.

In THE DEBATE that followed, it was noted that one major problem is that Further Education funding is capped. There is little point in discussing entitlement to education if the places are not there. The proposal in the review for uncapped access to courses at Levels 2 and 3 is welcome, but this does not tackle the bigger picture.

If accepted, the review's proposals will lead to Treasury providing some funding for HE. This is likely to result in a return to controls on numbers entering this sector as funding is restricted. In addition, greater financial support for FE could impact on the money available for research in HE.

Teaching and research are closely linked in universities with staff normally carrying out both roles. If money is reduced, then staff are likely to be required to spend more time teaching, allowing less capacity for research. Universities point out that they already make a significant loss on their research activities and a cut in funding could reduce this further.

It is unfortunate that the media and the public in general refer to 'tuition fees' when they should more accurately be described as 'university fees'. There is a great deal of cross-subsidy of different activities within universities and it is very difficult to apportion exactly the funding for each.

While everyone understands the status of a university, there is no such 'protected title' in FE. A college can be a school, a private provider or a Further Education institution. Colleges do not confer their own awards but rather run courses for other awarding bodies (such as universities). Having a recognisable and well-understood title for FE institutions would help.

What will the government do with this report? Will its recommendations ever be turned into reality? The incoming Prime Minister will have a lot in their inbox. Given the current impasse in Parliament, measures that require legislation will be more difficult than those that do not. In addition, HE has recently been the subject of a major piece of legislation: revisiting the subject so soon may not be seen as desirable.

This report calls for the Treasury to provide new money for HE. It also calls for extra money for FE. This is a difficult message for government. Indeed, FE might have more chance of getting more funding if it was treated separately from HE.

But tertiary education needs to be seen as a single ecosystem, not as separate silos. This report does have that overarching approach to the sector. And there is much that FE and HE can do together – there are many examples across the country. The fundamental problem is that there is not enough money in the system as a whole. So the question may come down to whether, in order to properly finance FE, we are prepared to see some money taken away from HE. That may be the acid test of our willingness for reform.

Without renewed focus upon – and funding for – FE, the country will not have the trained technicians needed to translate research into commercial reality and that will impact on productivity and economic success.

In the media coverage of this report, all the focus was on HE. Those in the HE world need to help make the case for FE so that a united voice can be heard.

Simon Napper

Useful Reading:

Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding May 2019
www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report

Prime Minister launches major review of post-18 education
www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-major-review-of-post-18-education

Prime Minister's Transcript of speech delivered on 19 February 2018
The right education for everyone
www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-the-right-education-for-everyone

Department for Education
Review of Post-18 Education and Funding
Terms of Reference
www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682348/Post_18_review_-_ToR.pdf

Post-18 education and funding
Options for the government review
David Robnson and Daniel Carr, May 2019 Education Policy Institute

House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 8490, 21 February 2019
The forthcoming review of post-18 education and funding
Sue Hubble, Paul Bolton and David Foster
www.researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8490

House of Commons Library
Summary of potential impact of reforms to HE Funding
www.researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8490/Summary-of-potential-impacts.pdf

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted

The Technical and Further Education Act 2017
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/19/contents

The Robbins report on Higher Education, 1963
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>