



EDUCATION NETWORK



Education Network Forum

12th February 2018, 6-8pm

Session 1: The post-18 education funding review

Led by Vasiliki Sogia (Bristol SU Policy and Campaigns Coordinator)

Vasiliki outlined the context of the review, which the government is currently undertaking to make recommendations on the future of post-18 education fees and funding in the UK (see [here](#) for more information). The session would encompass running through some of the leaks that have come out about what the report might contain (though not certain until it is published), and pre-emptively gathering students thoughts on the possible outcomes.

A short Powerpoint introduction:

- Defined the post-18/Augar review:
 - Listed as Tories manifesto point
 - A lot of emphasis put on Higher Education (i.e. universities)
 - Review said to come out Feb/March
- What is the current problem?
 - Current options are not good for many young people
 - The government realised that most universities charge maximum fees
 - 3 year degrees remain the norm
 - Want to see whether that's the best value for money
 - Another look at the funding system
 - System doesn't deliver on core things needed to 'future-proof' the economy
- 4 main focus areas
 - Choice
 - Value for money
 - Skills provision - we need engineers etc. for the future jobs market
 - Access - enabling people from all backgrounds to get into HE

See the [Powerpoint presentation](#) for more detail.

Tables then discussed the following questions on '**value for money**':

- *How would you define value for money in HE?*
- *How would you measure it in HE?*

Thoughts from group feedback:

- Defined value for money as how much interaction you get with the university: contact hours, hidden costs (e.g. books, lab coats, facilities).
 - This potentially devalues arts degrees or suggests that they are less 'value for money' (especially as Arts fees often subsidise more expensive to run courses).
- Availability of resources and learning materials, services such as wellbeing support, quality of feedback and personal development support.
- Could be measured via graduate employability
 - Other students thought that there are many more variables to employability- for example what subject you study, whether this equips you with freelance skills e.g. in film) or limits students to one career path (e.g. medicine).
 - How a specific course compares to other options which could lead to the same career
- This idea of 'value' is entrenched from early on- from GCSEs and A levels determining university place, and then university defining earning potential.
- Value could be measured by satisfaction - but this is often retrospective and depends also on how a student does once they have left the university- harder to monitor as satisfaction could depend on what jobs people get much further down the line.
 - You would need to ask alumni consistently at different points in their career.
- Quality of opportunities could be a measure? This is not necessarily equal to the 'quality' of other students.
- Some also questioned whether "value for money" should even be a consideration in HE? It implies that education is a commodity rather than a right, and plays into the marketisation of education and issues attendant on that.
- The 'worth' of a degree has already been inflated, meaning that even without differentiated fees students are already making 'value for money' calculations based on future employment prospects.
- Can you put monetary value on a holistic experience? This implies that the only gain from university is a graduate salary, which is not the case.

Vasiliki then talked about the possibility of **differential fees**:

- Leak that came from the government
- Idea of different fees for different courses
- Headline rate lowered to £6500, but some more expensive courses might rise to £13,000+
 - Massive increase for Sci/Eng/Medicine; massive decrease for Arts
 - One assumption being arts students will earn less

Tables then discussed the following questions:

- *Is this plan socially regressive? Could it push poorer students away from medicine and science subjects and on to other cheaper courses.*
- *Is this positive for Arts and Humanities? Contact hours are limited and some students feel that the £9,250 price is too high for what they get in return.*

- *Consider the loss of funding for universities- arts and humanities ‘heavy’ universities would see a major income cut in this scenario. What would that mean for student services and academic quality?*
- *Is your ‘value for money’ definition similar to what is being proposed here?*

Thoughts from group feedback:

- The group reaction was generally negative
- The questions depend on whether we should think of what students are paying in fees as funding their own individual degrees, or supporting the university as a whole.
- In the former case, students might take issue with where money is spent within the university/ at course level, and be happy to be ‘getting what they pay for’
- However, potential net losses of funding to universities would affect even students who are paying the higher fees, with potential cuts to facilities, wellbeing and social services etc.
- Sense that fees re too high in any case, let alone if raised
- Differential fees could create more issues and perceived dichotomies between Arts and STEM subjects
- Lowering Arts fees might excuse universities from actually questioning whether their degree programmes with lower contact hours are working well for students, or providing value for money/ time investment.
- Students might prefer raised contact hours/ provision of resources, rather than reduced fees.
- Generally, the room agreed that this policy would be ‘socially regressive’, entrenching elitism.
- If this ends up being the governments’ plan, they should increase student loans accordingly, along with provision of grants to students on higher fee courses
- However, this doesn’t solve the issue of students then living with those bigger loans- students are already afraid of debt, and the potential of increasing it would put people off more expensive courses like medicine
- We would end up in a situation where students do not follow their preferred path because of cost/ future debt- this would disproportionately affect students from lower socioeconomic and other widening participation backgrounds.
- Raising fees for STEM subjects is problematic because while some related jobs are well paid, others are not. Some students study e.g. engineering, but want to go on to work for an NGO or similar organisation: higher fees and debts would discourage STEM graduates from working in the charity and public sectors.
- Raising fees for Medicine could exacerbate existing job shortages in the healthcare system.
- Students are not completely paying back their loans now- surely this would just be even more unsustainable with higher fees? A graduate tax would mean longer term payments, but make university admissions fairer at the point of entry.
- Not all graduate jobs are degree specific- there is no consistent link between course and future earnings.
- Concerns about how this would affect international students
- Some expressed that regardless of the amount (even if fees in general were much lower) they were against the idea of tiered fees in principle.
- In summary, this is not something the room in general would support as it would exacerbate inequalities among other issues.

Vasiliki introduced the idea of **linking A-level results to student loans**:

- *An idea that is allegedly being proposed: that students who achieve 3 Ds or lower at A level won't be offered a university student loan.*
- *This is to incentivise people to apply to non-HE further education institutions, e.g. taking apprenticeships or vocational courses, which might line up better with the skills needed for specific jobs.*
- *There has been a generally negative reaction to this leak*

Groups then discussed:

- How does this plan fit under the review's 'Choice' priority?
- Is it 'identifying ways to help people make more effective choices between the different options available after 18'?
- Or is it prohibiting people from following their dreams and living the 'transformative experience' that is university?
- Does it offer 'value for money'? Assuming the people with low A-level results would not get into high-earning degrees such as medicine, are they financially better-off doing vocational courses?
- What is the best way of encouraging students to go into vocational careers?

Sam Jones (UoB Academic Quality manager, sitting in on the session), said that in her experience the achievements of students who have come to Bristol through widening participation initiatives such as the Bristol Scholars programme show that A level results are not a reliable indicator of performance at university.

Group thoughts:

- A positive of this move would be that students are directed towards further education options that suit them better, potentially flagging students who would still struggle at university, and limiting unnecessary spending or accruing debt.
- It may also stop students from being pressured into university by parents etc. when it is not actually the right option for them.
- Others disagreed and thought that this would be limiting people's choices, and thought apprenticeships were restrictive and limited to certain professions- this move would reinforce classism.
- Sense that there is not enough funding in the apprenticeships system, and more desirable ones are super competitive.
- Opening up more choice for technical/ vocational options would be good, but this shouldn't narrow down who is able to access university courses if that is what they want to do. Forcing options is not real 'choice'.
- This system would frame taking a non-university route as a 'punishment', and suggest that this is still inferior to a university degree.
- Mindsets need to be changed at secondary school level to encourage more students to take vocational routes- this would not help.
- Concern that some universities would have their student numbers significantly affected by this, and that some HE institutions will suffer disproportionately.
- A level results can be influenced by so many other factors, and it is university which becomes (more of) a level playing field- this is backed up by statistics. A student from a less privileged

background should in theory be able to get the same level of education at university, which is not the case for A levels/ equivalents.

- This move could be seen as ableist: A levels/ BTECS etc. are not the best way of assessing all students' capabilities, and lower grades may be due to this, illness, caring responsibilities, personal issues, or a host of other reasons.
- A levels rely on exam-based assessment, which is not a reliable indicator of how a student will perform at university and respond to more applied assessments of their skills.
- There are cut-offs throughout the education system (e.g. needing certain GCSE grades to progress to A level)- but offering a place or making an offer should be the university's choice.
- Not all degrees line up with A levels- e.g. philosophy, fashion, gender studies.
- Sense that alternative options to university need to be improved (e.g. by offering more funding/ loans for vocational options, encouraging company sponsorships, making more information available to students, schools, parents etc.), but not at the cost of making universities less accessible.
- Students also commented that there should be a cap on student numbers at universities- that many (including UoB) have too many students and do not have the facilities to support them. Rapidly expanding universities also affect their cities and can have a negative impact on local communities.

While none of these leaked recommendations will be confirmed until the Augar report comes out in late February/ March, the SU will have the views that students expressed in this session ready to draw on if and when we are asked to respond: making sure that we are always representing and working in the interests of Bristol students. We will keep you posted with the results of the report, and give students more opportunities to voice your thoughts if needed.

Session 2: Effective collaboration between students and university staff

Martha Quinn-Forgan (University of Bristol Education Strategy Manager) presented the 'Assessing Well' project: a future university-wide project that is being pitched, to rethink assessment across the university, particularly focussing on how assessment affects wellbeing and mental health, and how any negative impacts can be minimised. In both this potential project and in future large-scale strategic initiatives, the university is moving towards better including students in all stages of the project (design, implementation, and feedback), as opposed to traditional practice where students are only asked to input at the feedback stage (or asked for their input when it is already too late to make significant changes). With this aim of effective 'co-creation' in mind, students at the forum were asked to reflect on their own experiences of good and bad student engagement initiatives and environments.

Reflection on best-case examples of collaboration/ co-creation. Students were asked to think of a positive experience of working collaboratively on an education-related project or change-making with university staff (e.g. changing something about their course through staff/student liaison meetings, being approached for input on a programme change, a new building space etc.). They then discussed their experiences with their table, followed by feedback to the room.

Framing questions:

- *What made you motivated to engage with the work in the first place?*
- *What kinds of engagement activity worked well (e.g. meetings with staff, workshops, focus groups, surveys, lecture polls etc.)?*
- *What helped you to understand the issue(s) you were working on?*
- *What made you feel that your input was valuable and listened to?*

Positives

- Lunch with senior tutor and school education director- feeling of a personal relationship
- Timetabled sessions, plus free food and drink
- Frequency = community. In maths, events took place 3 x term, liberal arts 1 x term and social policy 1 x term for every first year.
- SSLCs are good as quick direct contact to people with the power to make changes
- FSSLCs one course rep per faculty, represent other people, opportunity to express directly to UG faculty director
- Being invited and feeling personally valued/ like students have something concrete to contribute
- Being paid or given other incentives (e.g. vouchers, gaining employability skills)
- Needs to be relatable – how the project/ change will affect students needs to be clearly communicated
- The purpose of the meeting/ session needs to be properly communicated:
 - Why the particular student is being asked to input- what knowledge/ experience can they bring?
 - A clear sense of why the information/ input is being gathered, what will be done with it, and follow-up.
- Students want an idea of what happens after the session(s): this does not have to be the end result, but often there is no further communication about how student's ideas are then taken forwards
- Sessions/ questions need to be specific: even if ideas are gathered/ guided through open ended questions, the intended outcomes need to be clearly decided and communicated beforehand
- Going to students where they already are (e.g. taking polls or surveys in lectures or in timetabled sessions for focus groups) can be more effective in engaging a wider cross-section of the student body.
- There should be options for anonymous comments and feedback.
- Including social opportunities or at least the opportunity to meet students with similar priorities/ interests is motivating

Reflection on worst-case examples: students asked to repeat the previous exercise with negative experiences (including times when they didn't engage with activity or were put off from the start).

Framing questions:

- *Why were you reluctant to engage in the first place (if this was the case)?*
- *Why you felt that you couldn't input effectively, or that your input wasn't being heard?*
- *What stopped you or other students from participating effectively?*

Negative

- Course reps had found that students believe they can make a change, but because reps don't have the power to make changes to everything, students can become disappointed and stop engaging.
- This linked to a wider problem with a lack of feedback from staff committees to the student body – students don't understand why an idea or change is rejected, or what has happened with their comments/ issues
- Students struggled when they were being asked to input on topics that they didn't feel they had specific knowledge of- or had not been given the opportunity to learn about the topic/ issue enough to engage constructively in discussions.
- First years often felt like their voice matters less, partly to do with a perceived lack of knowledge, partly to do with certain rooms/ environments feeling intimidating.
- Reps reported frustration when staff/ committees appeared to have an open-door policies for student opinion, but each concern raised/ request for change was shut down.
- Often changes made by course reps are down to individuals' initiative, not to the accessibility of current change-making structures
- Students had felt an imbalance of authority when working with university staff.
- Students are unmotivated to engage with change which will happen once they have graduated or progressed to the next year.
- Surveys often had unhelpfully short deadlines
- Students found on-the-spot surveys in study spaces etc. to be disruptive- it would be better to have stalls which students can opt into if they want
- Often students don't get enough information about an event/ meeting to know if it is applicable or accessible to them- for example "Education Network Forum" might sound really official or intimidating, when sharing pictures or otherwise showing how it is an informal event for student discussion would really encourage more people to attend.
- Engagement after the fact is frustrating- particularly being told that something didn't work and asking for feedback to fix it, when, if asked in advance, students could have said that it wouldn't work in the first place.
- Feedback only benefits next years' students and not you.
- Some staff are not open to disagreements on subjective issues/ contradicting opinions
- It is not clear that time devoted to feedback and student input is appreciated or goes anywhere
- General feeling that the university is set up as a research institute- not prioritising good teaching etc. Students therefore might resent being asked to help improve something that they think university staff should already know how to do properly (i.e. organising their educational experience).

Groups then discussed how student engagement would look in their ideal scenario, centring around questions on each table.

Question

How should these activities engage a diverse range of students?

- Target groups directly if specifically want them to engage – do not just assume that a diverse range of students will automatically get involved.

What engagement activities would you like to see in the future?

- Scheduled events for course reps to gather feedback from their course-mates in advance

- Help course reps to be more effective by more clearly telling them what to expect
- Free food/ other incentives, which also show that students' time is being valued
- Structure is necessary, but sessions should still be informal and relaxed
- Well-advertised with clear description of what to expect
- Simple approaches- e.g. 3 suggestions to improve about your course on paper and into a feedback box
- Provide references for course reps and students engaged in any long-term projects (LinkedIn and real)
- For large strategic projects, set up a series of workshops or sessions so that a group of interested students can gain the knowledge they need, add to their personal/ career development, and properly see the trajectory of a project.

What motivates students to take part?

- Knowing how relevant the activity is – clearly defined aims
- Have the opportunity to add things afterwards
- Clear follow up
- Food!
- Bristol plus award recognition
- Money / vouchers
- Feeling engaged with the SU/ university, knowing other engaged students and staff
- Timetabled events
- If your friends are going
- Benefits (like a voucher for every 5 attendances) if you go to more than one event for example
- Social aspect
- Being able to make a genuine change
- The 'naming of senate house' first focus group was really good – clear student voice having an impact.

Key Recommendations to take forwards:

1. Ensure that students are being asked to engage in projects that are relevant to their interests (academic, professional or otherwise) and value their specific expertise, position or experience.
2. Clearly communicate the aims of the session(s) or survey(s), what it will contain, and what the outputs would be.
3. Involve students in closing the feedback loop- keeping up communications to show what has been done with students' input and why it is valuable.
4. Keep sessions unthreatening and relaxed, addressing a perceived power imbalance between students and staff.
5. Ensure sessions are clearly and accessibly structured, especially in sessions which form part of a series. Series are very useful in making sure students understand what they are working on, feel invested in the project, and understand what their input is being used for.