



The Higher Education and Research Bill: Student roundtable with the Minister

Monday 11 July; 3:00pm-4:00pm; Committee Room 19, House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

Introduction

On 19 May 2016, the Higher Education and Research Bill was introduced to Parliament for its first reading in the House of Commons.

This Bill enacts a number of the reforms to the higher education system that the Government first announced in a Green Paper in November 2015, and reaffirmed in a White Paper in May 2016. These reforms aim to improve student choice and defend students' interests, which it proposes to achieve through opening up the higher education market to new providers, introducing a 'Teaching Excellence Framework' to assess the quality of teaching in universities, and creating a new 'Office for Students' to be the regulator for the sector.

The Bill at a glance

Part 1 concerns the 'Office for Students'.

- This new body will replace the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and incorporate the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).
- It will absorb the roles of each, becoming a regulator and funding body for teaching in the higher education sector.
- The OfS will maintain a register of higher education providers, which will place a number of requirements on institutions in order for them to call themselves a 'registered provider' and access benefits including higher tuition fees.
- The OfS will oversee the expansion of the higher education market to new providers and will regulate a new route of entry for those new providers into the higher education system.

Part 2 reforms general higher education measures.

- It creates a system of sharia-compliant student loans.
- It ensures all registered higher education providers must be covered by the student complaints regime.
- It deregulates higher education corporations to bring them into line with regulation of other publicly-funded higher education providers.

Part 3 reforms the UK's research council system.

- It creates a single research council, *United Kingdom Research and Innovation*.
- This new body combines the 7 existing, separate research councils, Innovate UK and Research England into one structure.

Government aims

The government has outlined its vision for the Bill and the associated policies within the White Paper:

"This Bill will deliver **greater competition and choice** that will **promote social mobility, boost productivity** in the economy and ensure students and taxpayers receive **value for money** from their investment in higher education, while safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It will help ensure that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher study can access relevant information to help them make the right choices from a wide range of high-quality universities and benefit from excellent teaching that supports their future productivity. It will also strengthen the UK's world-class capabilities in research and innovation."

– Higher Education and Research Bill: factsheet,¹
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524595/bis-16-285-higher-education-research-bill-summary.pdf



The student impact

This is the first higher education bill for a decade. Students have been put centre stage by the policy and so it is important to engage students in the process.

The responses from students' unions to the Green Paper consultation,² and subsequent reaction to the Bill itself after first reading, identify key questions around the impact on students.³

Deciding the student interest

The Office for Students is to be established as a new regulator for the sector that will represent and defend student interest in a newly opened market.

Questions to consider:

- How will the Office for Students represent students within its structures?
- How will the Office for Students work with students to determine what is in the student interest?
- How will the Office for Students encourage higher education providers to engage with their students to improve the quality of teaching and the wider student experience?
- To what extent is the narrative of 'competition' a helpful one for the higher education sector, and what impact does this have on perceptions on students as consumers?

Protecting students in a competitive market

The proposals in the White Paper will open the market to new higher education providers, who will be able to award degrees, call themselves universities and potentially 'exit the market'. For the first time, each provider will be required to create a 'Student Protection Plan', under provisions in the Bill.

Questions to consider:

- When will additional guidance or regulations about what will be expected to be included in Student Protection Plans be available?
- What regulations will be laid regarding the eligibility for public funding of for-profit new providers?

Access and participation

The Bill will place duties on higher education providers to provide 'transparency data' on applications, offer and acceptance rates to the OfS. It will create 'Access and Participation Plans', expanding the scope of existing 'Access Agreements', to entitle institutions to charge higher tuition fees. It will also establish a sharia-compliant student loan system to facilitate access to university for students unable to take on interest-bearing student loans.

Questions to consider:

- What mechanisms are being put in place to monitor the Government's progress in widening access and participation?
- What role does the Bill secure for students in shaping their institution's Access and Participation Plan?
- In what ways will the Bill improve the access and participation in higher education of part-time and mature students?
- From what academic year will sharia-compliant student loans be made available?

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523420/bis-16-261-he-green-paper-fulfilling-our-potential-summary-of-responses.pdf

³ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/nus-responds-to-the-government-s-higher-education-and-research-bill>