



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

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

Summary of the meeting

Paul Blomfield, Chair of the APPG, thanked Jo Johnson (Minister of State for Universities and Science) for joining the APPG to discuss the HE Bill, and thanked him for the consultative approach that had been employed to shaping the reforms. He welcomed the student representatives to the meeting and noted that this APPG existed to give students a voice in parliament.

Jo Johnson opened his introduction to the HE Bill and White Paper by emphasising that the consultative process was still going. He highlighted that there had not been a comprehensive Bill for universities since 1992 and it was important to make the most of it and ensure students views were reflected. In an unusually turbulent period, the Minister identified that HE reform – a manifesto commitment – was “emblematic of the need to deliver on the Government’s commitments”. He identified that the HE Bill was a way of “mainstreaming student voice and interest”, through: the creation of the Office for Students; making participation more inclusive, through expanding the remit of the Director of Fair Access and creating a ‘transparency duty’ on universities; creating a Teaching Excellence Framework to incentivise universities to focus on the quality of student experience; and, creating Student Protection Plans.

Sorana Vieru, Vice President (Higher Education) at NUS, responded with the student perspective on the Bill. She outlined concerns that increasing competition in the higher education system – through making it easier for new providers to set up and hand out degrees – would not improve quality. She expressed concerns about how students would be protected and prioritised in a system where education providers could collapse and ‘exit the market’. She identified grave concerns amongst students about the Teaching Excellence Framework, especially about whether its proposed metrics measure teaching quality at all and the proposed link to tuition fees. She stated four priorities for the Bill itself, that she thought were realistic: 1. Improving student representation, including through reserving a place for a student on the Office for Students board; 2. An annual access and participation plan; 3. Clear reassurance that students would be indemnified from loss if their institution or course closes; and, 4. A duty on universities to support student voter registration through integrating registration with academic enrolment.

The roundtable then opened up to reflections from the MPs and students in the room, including:

- Whether it was sensible to continue an overhaul of the system in the middle of Brexit uncertainty
- What impact the TEF would have on the devolved nations
- How Access and Participation Plans would use examples of best practice
- How the Bill would address the decline of part-time and mature students, who often come from access and participation backgrounds – and are therefore nominally meant to benefit
- How TEF metrics will engage student voice and be reflective of the broad student experience
- The risk of new providers closing when these providers are the ones that more disadvantaged students are likely to go to
- The position of international students in these reforms, especially in the wake of Brexit
- The proposed inflationary increase in tuition fees and the impact that the shift to a loans-based (rather than grants) student finance system will have on deterring disadvantaged, BME and women students

Sorana concluded by noting there would always be ideological differences about the shape of the HE system but it was important for students and government to have open, honest conversations.

Jo Johnson concluded by responding to each particular question and noting that the government have created a system that lets more students go to university.