



The importance of student engagement: in conversation with Philip Augar

Tuesday 12th June; 9.30 – 10.30am

Committee Room 13, Houses of Parliament, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

Introduction

In February 2018, the Department of Education launched a review into post-18 education and funding. The review itself is set to focus on four key areas, with the ambition of creating a tertiary education system that is accessible for all students. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students is committed to raising the concerns facing students and brings together MPs and Peers across the political spectrum to encourage students to actively participate in politics. This APPG event hopes to shed light on challenges currently facing students with regard to post-18 education and engage with the review process to ensure the student voice is heard.

Post-18 Education and Research Review

The review will take place over the course of a year and an independent advisory panel, chaired by Philip Augar, will first undertake a consultation period inviting experts from the education sector and the business world to provide evidence, with the aim of reporting back to the Department of Education in the autumn of 2018.

The review will focus on four specific areas:

- **Choice:** identifying ways to help people make more effective choices between the different options available after 18, so they can make more informed decisions about their futures. This could include more information about the earning potential of different jobs and what different qualifications are needed to get them, as well as ensuring they have access to a genuine range of high quality academic, technical or vocational routes.
- **Value for money:** looking at how students and graduates contribute to the cost of their studies, to ensure funding arrangements across post-18 education in the future are transparent and do not stop people from accessing higher education or training.
- **Access:** enabling people from all backgrounds to progress and succeed in post-18 education, while also examining how disadvantaged students receive additional financial support from the government, universities and colleges.
- **Skills provision:** future-proofing the economy by making sure we have a post-18 education system that is providing the skills that employers need. This has been noted as a crucial part of the review in helping to boost the UK economy and delivering on the government's Industrial Strategy.¹

The review will look to conclude in early 2019.

Challenges facing students

Many sector representatives, experts and student bodies have welcomed the review of post-18 education and funding. It was acknowledged by the Department for Education, that the current post-18 system is not fit for purpose, for students, academics or the taxpayer. The Prime Minister noted back in February that whilst higher education has come a long way, the UK currently still has one of the most expensive systems of university tuition in the world.²

On average graduates are leaving university with up to £50,000 worth of debt³ and there has been much public debate on the affordability of higher education. In particular, financial support has been noted as one of a growing concern for many students in accessing and succeeding in both further and higher education. The abolishment of maintenance grants, NHS bursaries, disabled students allowance (DSA) and education maintenance allowance (EMA), according to organisations such as the NUS, have put an additional pressure on young people who are struggling with the costs of living. Maintenance grants in particular, were a key element in improving the accessibility of university for the most disadvantaged young people. While in the last decade participation in Higher Education by the poorest students has increased, this was partly driven by the availability of

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-major-review-of-post-18-education>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43106736>

³ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/9334>



non-repayable grants. A 2014 study by the Institute of Education showed that a £1,000 increase in grants created a 3.95% increase in participation.⁴

Moreover, NUS's most recent report *Poverty Commission* (2018) which focuses specifically on the barriers facing working-class students in accessing education, also found that on average student expenditure routinely exceeds the income available through student support. According to the NUS, this has left many students without the means to pay for food or heating. Accommodation costs are also identified as substantial barriers to access for low income students, specifically within an environment of increasing privatisation of student accommodation and increasing prices in rent costs for students.⁵ Student halls also routinely exceed what is affordable given the maintenance loan available to students. The pricing policy risks segregating working-class students.⁶

Organisations such as Universities UK (UUK) have further argued that the high levels of interest currently attributed to tuition fees in higher education should be revisited. Additionally, in response to the post-18 education have specifically called for new funding to restore maintenance grants for those in need.⁷ One of the main recommendations as part of the *Poverty Commission* is to reinstate entitlement to grant funding across further and higher education, including maintenance grants for undergraduate students, EMA and NHS bursaries at significantly improved rates.

Yesterday, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee published a report, *Treating students Fairly*, following an inquiry into the economics of further and higher education, and have put forward a number of recommendations, one including access to maintenance support.⁸ The Committee note that that maintenance support is "inconsistent" across all the different forms of higher education and that it should be made available to all students in higher education. They further argue that current funding in post-school education is "too heavily skewed towards degrees" and that there should be "better distribution of public funding across all forms and institutions in higher and further education."⁹

Access

Widening participation and access to post-18 education has been noted as another key challenge by many in the education sector and is one of the four strategic objectives for the Office of Students (OfS). More specifically, with the social and cultural barriers to accessing education for many disadvantaged learners, post-18 education can seem a distant, pursuit unrelated to the interests and needs apparent to many working-class people. Whilst there are more people going to university than ever, data from the OfS has shown that students from black, Asian, disabled or from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to access or succeed in university.¹⁰

A key recommendation from the *Poverty Commission* report was that post-18 education should be accessible, available, appropriate and timely. Strategies for inclusion should focus on change within institutions, rather than applicants, to broaden access to low-income students. Furthermore, the *Treating Students Fairly* report also noted that the current higher education system "perpetuates inequality" by restricting those students from poorer backgrounds through lack of maintenance support and are put off entering higher education, due to the burden of debt.¹¹

For details of our next event or to receive more information about the APPG on Students, please contact the Secretariat to the APPG on Students: info@appg-students.org.uk.

⁴ [Money for nothing: Estimating the impact of student aid on participation in higher education, 2014](#)

⁵ https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/Unipol_NUS_AccommodationCostsSurvey2015.pdf

⁶ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/class-dismissed-getting-in-and-getting-on-in-further-and-higher-education>

⁷ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/uuk-response-post-18-review-education-funding-call-evidence.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/class-dismissed-getting-in-and-getting-on-in-further-and-higher-education>

⁹ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/class-dismissed-getting-in-and-getting-on-in-further-and-higher-education>

¹⁰ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/>

¹¹ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/class-dismissed-getting-in-and-getting-on-in-further-and-higher-education>